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ABSTRACT

The students of the targeted sixth grade class exhibited low standardized test scores in reading. Despite many efforts, this problem reached a crisis point in the fall of 2001, when the school as a whole placed at the bottom of the district on the state standards test, which was taken by this group of students in the spring of their fifth-grade year. In addition to these state test scores, evidence for the problem included other standardized test scores, Accelerated Reader Star Test results, and attitude surveys conducted by the classroom teacher. A review of the literature revealed that the probable cause for these declining test scores might lie in the methods of instruction that had been used with these children over their previous five years in school. There has been a great deal of debate between instructional methods with repeated pendulum swings between phonics instruction and whole language, both of which leave some children with deficits in their learning. All children do not learn in the same way; yet school districts have persisted in looking for a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction that has inevitably failed to meet expectations. Solutions to this problem pointed in the direction of a balanced approach to literacy instruction. This methodology explicitly teaches the skills inherent in phonics, while preserving the high interest and motivation found in whole language. In the best scenarios, four approaches to learning are combined in a balanced way: teacher directed reading instruction, self-selected reading, word skills instruction, and writing. The intervention in the classroom incorporated these four ways of teaching students to be literate as part of a school-wide adoption of the Four Blocks of Literacy model of instruction. It focused more narrowly on the potential benefit of weekly reading conferences and the opportunities these afforded for individualizing the student's reading instruction and improving the student's motivation through guiding and supporting the choice of quality reading material. The intervention recorded improvement in students' reading levels, along with other insights into reading instruction. Appendixes contain a student survey instrument, a self-selected reading conference record, quotes from Louisa May Alcott's "Little Men," data and survey results, a 6-item annotated bibliography of novels used in the project, permission letters, a cloze test based on chapter 1 of "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," and results of the cloze test. (Contains 52 references and 11 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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Abstract

The students of the targeted sixth grade class exhibited low standardized test scores in reading. Despite many efforts, this problem reached a crisis point in the fall of 2001, when the school as a whole placed at the bottom of the district on the state standards test, which was taken by this group of students in the spring of their fifth-grade year. In addition to these state test scores, evidence for the problem included other standardized test scores, Accelerated Reader Star Test results, and attitude surveys conducted by the classroom teacher.

A review of the literature revealed that the probable cause for these declining test scores might lie in the methods of instruction that had been used with these children over their previous five years in school. There has been a great deal of debate between instructional methods with repeated pendulum swings between phonics instruction and whole language, both of which leave some children with deficits in their learning. All children do not learn in the same way; yet school districts have persisted in looking for a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction that has inevitably failed to meet expectations.

Solutions to this problem pointed in the direction of a balanced approach to literacy instruction. This methodology explicitly teaches the skills inherent in phonics, while preserving the high interest and motivation found in whole language. In the best scenarios, four approaches to learning are combined in a balanced way: teacher directed reading instruction, self-selected reading, word skills instruction, and writing.

The intervention in the classroom incorporated these four ways of teaching students to be literate as part of a school-wide adoption of the Four Blocks of Literacy model of instruction. It focused more narrowly on the potential benefit of weekly reading conferences and the opportunities these afforded for individualizing the student's reading instruction and improving the student's motivation through guiding and supporting the choice of quality reading material. The intervention recorded improvement in students' reading levels, along with other insights into reading instruction.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted sixth grade class exhibit low standardized test scores in reading. Despite many efforts, this problem reached a crisis point in the fall of 2001, when the school as a whole placed at the bottom of the district in the state standards test results. Evidence for the problem includes these state test scores, Accelerated Reader STAR Test results, teacher's anecdotal records, and attitude surveys conducted by the classroom teacher.

Immediate Problem Context

School

The school was built in the early 1960's in response to the need created by a housing boom in the community. The student body quickly outgrew the original building and new wings were added by 1970. It is a flat roofed, one-story brick and cement block building with two courtyards that are sporadically maintained, depending on the level of teacher and community interest in any given year. The organization of the classrooms in the school is based on the four main hallways, which are configured much like a capital letter H. The front of the building is the left side of the H, with the main door in the middle. To the left as a visitor enters the school, one long hallway houses kindergarten and first grade. To the right is the hall that houses fifth and sixth grade, the computer lab and the bilingual resource room. Along the far side of the

school, the hall to the left holds second and third grade, the music room, and the teachers' lounge. The gym is located between this and the last hall, which contains two special education rooms, fourth grade and the art room. The library media center is situated between the fourth grade and fifth and sixth grade halls. It is a semi-open area with bookcases forming walls that reach up about six feet, leaving the entryways open and providing display space at the top. Special service personnel have interior offices with windows opening onto the courtyard. The main office is also in an interior space. Due to this, visitors must be allowed to enter via a video intercom system. Staff members have passkey ID's to gain entry to the building and which are to be worn at all times in the building. Of the four other exterior doors, only two have a key swipe. The building is locked at all times.

All of the students eat lunch in their own classrooms, with half the classes eating for 25 minutes and going outside for a 20-minute recess, the other half going outside first and then eating their lunches. Paid lunch supervisors, some of whom are teachers, take care of the children during this time. Most classes have a 15-minute recess at some time during the day. All students have a special class every day: two days with 30 minutes of physical education, two days with 30 minutes of music, and one day with 40 minutes of art. These specials provide the planning time for the classroom teachers. All classrooms have three 30-minute Spanish classes a week. The classroom teacher provides support to the Spanish instructor during these classes, since this person is classified as an Instructional Assistant, not a certified teacher.

Outside the building there are two playgrounds, one for the primary students and one for the intermediate students. There is a large grassy area surrounding the school,

which is bounded by a fenced creek on three sides. This land belongs to the park district and includes tennis courts and a picnic shelter, which are not used by the school, and basketball courts, which are used by both the school and community. The only access to the school grounds is through the parking lot at the front entrance and via a footbridge spanning the creek in back of the school. This often causes traffic problems before and after school. The creek has also flooded the school three times in the past, most recently in 1990; however, it has been re-engineered and is not expected to do so again. Additionally, the creek's proximity to the school creates some interesting situations with wildlife. Canadian geese and their droppings are often seen on the playground, especially in the spring and fall. Several pairs of Mallard ducks return year after year to make nests and lay eggs in the school courtyards. Because the school grounds are not well lighted at night and have only one entrance, this is often a convenient site for late-night revelry. On Monday mornings it is not unusual to find beer bottles and other remnants of the previous weekend's illicit activities on the playground behind the school.

The school is located in a section of a community adjacent to the town serviced by the larger school district. According to the school's 2001 State Report Card, the racial/ethnic mix of the school is 51.5% White, 18.7% Hispanic, 15.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 14.3% Black, and 0.2% Native American. These statistics indicate that the school has 15.8% more Black and Hispanic students than is average for the rest of the district. Low-income students make up 10.9 % of the school's population and Limited-English Proficient students account for 6.7%. The school has a 14.1% mobility rate. The total enrollment of the school is 475, but this number is expected to decline in

upcoming years due to an aging neighborhood. Just two years ago, the enrollment was over 525.

The staff of the school is overwhelmingly white and female. There are 35 full-time certified staff members in the building. Of these, 97.5% are female--just one person (2.5 % of the staff) is male. The racial mix of the certified staff is 97.5% White, 2.5% Black. There are 17 full time instructional assistants. Of these, 65% are White, 35% are Hispanic, no Black and no male. It should also be noted that three of the White female certified staff speak Spanish and are classified either as bilingual teachers or English-plus. This means they are teaching in a regular education, English-speaking classroom, but they are able to support their bilingual students and communicate with Hispanic parents more easily.

Of the certified staff, 53% have a masters degree or above and 47% hold bachelors degrees. The members of the school's staff have been teaching for an average of 17.35 years. One hundred percent of the staff is involved in professional development activities including Four Blocks of Literacy Training. Nineteen percent are currently taking coursework towards advanced degrees. The staff members hold multiple certificates, with 80% of the staff classified as elementary and 66% holding additional or other certificates that range from pre-school to bilingual to high school. Thirty-seven percent of the staff has participated in additional training such as Crisis Prevention Intervention, A-Team (additional technology support for special education children) and other activities.

Classroom

The classroom central to the study is located two-doors down from the main entrance of the school. It is identical to the other rooms of the school in size, shape, and fixtures. It is approximately 30 x 25 feet with two large windows separated by a good-sized bulletin board. Running the entire length of the window-wall is a long metal surface about three feet high and two feet deep in which the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system is located. Bookshelves are located at either end of this under the windows. The walls are off-white cement block. On the wall opposite the windows there is a long counter top over low cabinets with a closet at one end and a sink with cold water at the other end, nearest the door to the hallway. The solid walls on the other two sides of the room have chalkboards or dry-erase boards.

As in the other rooms in the school, there is a wall-mounted television and VCR, which is also connected through a focus box to the computer beneath it. There is a second computer for student use as well. Both are IBM 300GL machines with a color monitor and a shared color printer. Doors on the sides of the room lead from this classroom into the classrooms on both sides, making communication within the grade level easier. The main door to the classroom looks out onto the largest of the two school courtyards, bringing in an extra measure of natural light. The room also has a close proximity to the student rest rooms, which is a mixed blessing due to the noise other classes sometimes make during their bathroom trips.

There is usually student artwork displayed above the lockers in the adjacent hallway and seasonal decorations in the window of the doorway and on the door. Inside, there are several kites and windsocks in bright primary colors hanging in the

windows. There is a large, rainbow-colored, Trip Around the World pattern quilt on the wall. The bulletin board opposite the door features themes from social studies or science. The board over the sink is the Word Wall. Chalkboards are seldom used for their intended purpose, except for one section at the front of the room that has the day's assignments arranged by subject. The remainder of the chalkboards are used as display areas for posters. The overhead projector is in almost constant use during instructional times, either to display answers while correcting homework, to illustrate points under discussion, or to give directions for independent work.

Student desks are arranged in groups of four to six most of the time, with arrangements changing regularly. The room is not large enough to accommodate rows or many other configurations easily. Group seating also lends itself to cooperative work without too much furniture moving, although it can lead to excessive conversation at times, as well. The room has an air of organized chaos—student projects of several types lurk in corners and on countertops, bins of books for silent reading line one shelf, books that are not currently in bins await a more permanent home on the top of a table in the corner. A battered, old orange upholstered chair also occupies the book corner. The teacher's work area is a large wooden desk and two tables. One of these holds the overhead projector and podium, and one has the teacher's manuals, worksheets, and other teaching materials. Student papers move in and out of wire baskets on the adjacent windowsill. A crate with a hanging file folder for each student provides ready access to student writing portfolios. These things are usually organized, but not always neat. Overall, the classroom has an energetic, bright, friendly, and lived-in look.

The day begins with morning announcements over the school's closed-circ television system. The first academic subject of the day is science, for 30 minute Three days a week this is followed by 30 minutes of Spanish instruction, on anoth there a class focusing on cooperation and communication taught by the school so worker, and yet another day features supplementary math instruction from the gif education resource teacher. After that, the students go to their 30-minute special for the day—music, physical education, or art. Upon returning to the classroom, t a short break for drinks of water and bathroom usage, followed by math for 50 mi The morning ends with 30 minutes of social studies. After a 45-minute lunch brea afternoon is devoted to literacy, beginning with fifteen minutes of reading aloud by classroom teacher. This is followed by a 40-minute instruction time, and then a 1 minute recess, most often outdoors. Two more 30-minute instruction blocks round the day. Silent reading, guided reading, and writing are rotated during these three blocks of time.

District

This district is among the largest elementary-only school districts in the stat located primarily in a large suburb but also incorporating parts of four surrounding communities. There are 21 elementary schools, 5 junior high schools, and one kindergarten through eighth grade School of Choice. Students at this school are i multi-age classes and participate in a wider variety of learning activities than at the traditional schools. Attendance at the School of Choice is based on parent applic for their children.

Two of the elementary schools and one of the junior high schools offer dual-language programs in Spanish; another elementary school has a dual-language program in Japanese. Four schools offer Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) programs in Spanish, one in Japanese, and one in American Sign Language. In the dual-language model of instruction, all students in the school are taught in both languages. In FLES, the English-speaking students are taught lessons in the second language for 90 minutes per week. Bilingual students remain in the regular classroom during that time and often are called upon to assist their classmates.

According to the 2001/2002 State School Report Card, the racial/ethnic mix of students in the district is 66.9% White, 15.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 10.2% Hispanic, 7.0% Black, and only 0.6% Native American. Additionally, low-income students comprise 6.4% of the district population and limited English proficient students are 6.8% of the district's student body. The district mobility rate is 12.3%, the attendance rate is 96.0%, and the total district enrollment is 15,575 students in grades K through 8. These statistics show that the district has 6.8% fewer minority students than the state average, 30% fewer low-income students, and a slightly greater attendance rate.

In the instructional setting, average class size for sixth grade is 24.5 children, with a pupil to teacher ratio of 18.4 to 1 district-wide. The pupil to certified staff ratio is 13.5 to 1 and pupil to administrator is 245.3 to 1. Teachers are 96.7% White, 1.3% Hispanic, 0.8% Asian/Pacific islander, 0.7% Black, and 0.5% Native American. Average teaching experience is 18.2 years, 57.1 % of the staff have a masters degree or above, and 42.9% of the teachers hold a bachelors degree. The district staff is 86.9% female and 13.1% male. The total number of staff in the district is 1,010. Average teacher

salary is $60,489, about 20% higher than the state average, and average administrator salary is $97,538, just 15% higher than the statewide salary equivalent.

Financial information for the district reveals that the average assessed valuation per pupil is $222,803 with a tax rate of 3.60 per $100. Instructional expenditure per pupil is $5,207, with operating expenditure per pupil at $8,678. The district's budget totals $134,377,706. When compared to the data from the state level, most of this financial information reveals that this is a relatively affluent district, which is spending about 20% more per pupil than the state average. Interestingly, there is no budget item for site construction or capital improvement—this amount is reported as $0.00. District-wide there has been a history of declining enrollment due to the relatively land-locked nature of the area: there had been so much development for so long that there is now no more room for the kind of new housing areas that necessitated the building of so many schools twenty and thirty years ago.

Surrounding Community

As noted in the housing section of the regional newspaper, the school itself is located in an "urban quilt" community of approximately 37,000 people, which straddles two counties and four townships. Five school districts—two high school districts and three elementary or consolidated districts—claim parts of this town. It is a bedroom community consisting mainly of housing developments that merged together over time. Over 80% of the homes were built between 1960 and 1980. There is a village hall, police and fire departments and a park district, but there is no "downtown" area, and few retail businesses, most of which are grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and auto repair shops. There is little industry in the town itself.

This community is known for affordable housing. The average price of a single-family home in the area of the school is about $140,000. There is a neighboring townhome development where units sell for about $110,000. There is also low-income housing located behind a nearby shopping center. Neither this community nor the school itself has a good reputation in the district or it's primary community. Looking at the disparity between the two, it is not difficult to see the roots of this prejudice.

The adult population in the neighborhood of the school is almost entirely blue-collar. It is difficult to determine exact percentages of jobs because the statistics are published for the entire community and not just for the part concerned in this study. The portion of the community that is claimed by one of the other school districts is more affluent, with home prices in excess of $200,000, skewing the analysis of information. For example, median income for the community is published as being $74,375; however, in the vicinity of the school it would undoubtedly be much lower than that. All of this is in sharp contrast to the community in which the district itself is based, with median home prices in the vicinity of $250,000 and a median individual income of over $90,000.

Beyond the differences in income and home value, the racial mix of the school's community and district's community reveal sharp contrasts. The racial/ethnic mix of the school's own community is published in the local newspaper as being 78.1% White, 10.5% Hispanic, 7.6% Other, and 3.8% Black. Again, because the entire community is not representative of the neighborhood of the school, the minority figures for the school are most likely higher and the White population lower. By contrast, the community in which the school district itself is based is reported by the same regional newspaper to

be 88.9% White, 6.5% Other, 2.4% Hispanic, and 2.2% Black. These differences of race, income, and employment create problems for the school within both it's own community and the community in which the main body of the district is located. Another divisive factor is the way in which the boundaries for the elementary schools and high schools are drawn. Children who have attended elementary school and junior high school together for years, even some who may live across the street from one another, often have to go to different high schools. These three high schools, as could be expected, have a fierce rivalry.

All these factors combine to form a unique situation in which this school has become an anomaly in its own district. Other schools in the district may exhibit similar factors in areas such as low-income, high mobility, or low achievement; however, only this school has all these factors in addition to a location in a less desirable neighborhood.

National Context

Literacy has been a topic of great concern in America since the World War II era, when the nation's illiteracy rate began to rise. The 1930 United States Census reported an all-time low illiteracy rate of just 4.3%. Today, according to the book *Illiteracy in America* (as cited by the Rocky Mountain Family Council, 2001), this figure has risen to 30% of Americans who are totally or functionally illiterate. The National Assessment of Educational Progress 1998 Reading Report Card (as cited by Boulton, 2001) stated that almost 70% of fourth graders and 60% of high school seniors are less than proficient at reading. Twenty percent never read and another 20% never read higher than a fourth

or fifth-grade level. Up to 100 million adults read below the fifth-grade level, causing serious problems in the workplace.

The consequences of student reading problems are far-reaching. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) estimates that 40 % of the people in America have reading problems significant enough to hamper their enjoyment of reading. The National Institute for Literacy (as cited by the National Children' Literacy Project, 1998) states that, of people with the lowest literacy skills, 70% do not have full-time employment and 43% live in poverty. American business estimates losses of $60 billion per year in productivity due to employees' lack of basic skills.

The national problem in reading has also become a significant political issue. In 2001, President George W. Bush initiated a plan entitled, *No Child Left Behind*, in which he said, "We have a genuine national crisis. More and more, we are divided into two nations. One that reads, and one that doesn't. One that dreams, and one that doesn't" (Executive summary 2001). This legislation focuses on accountability for schools, teachers, and students by means of state educational standards testing. It also provides a Reading First Initiative, offering grants to states that establish comprehensive, research-based, reading programs for kindergarten to second grade. This education legislation received bi-partisan support in Congress (Goldstein, 2001).

In homes across America parents are vitally aware of their children's difficulties in reading. A brief viewing of virtually any cable television network showing children's programming will reveal multiple advertisements for Hooked On Phonics, the Phonics Game, Sylvan Learning Centers, and a number of other methods and services designed to entice parents to pay hard-earned dollars to help their children read better.

Teachers readily express their concerns about their students' difficulties in reading and writing. School districts continually change curriculum in order to teach literacy skills to children more successfully. As one method fails to raise student achievement, the other is brought in. When it also fails, a variation of the first method returns.

Clearly, America has a national problem with literacy. From the President to educators to the parents of America's schoolchildren and to their future employers, every person has a stake in our country's literacy and it's affect on our nation's future.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

There is an alarming lack of student reading achievement nationwide. Both the 1994 and 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress exams show that 40% of fourth graders score below basic levels of reading achievement with an additional 10% of students unable even to participate in testing due to severe reading difficulties—a total of half of all fourth graders in the tested group who did not meet the most basic levels of reading competence.

A comparable situation is found at the specific school at the heart of this paper's study, where the 2000-2001 results of state standards testing were worse than disappointing. The students who were fifth graders that year scored much lower than the district average, with 16% more than the district average below standards (45% total), an equal number meeting standards (37%), but only about half as many as the district level of 33% exceeding standards. A summary of these results is presented in table one.

Table 1

2000-2001 State Standards Test Results for Fifth Grade Reading

	Below Standards	Meets Standards	Exceeds Standards
School	45%	37%	18%
District	29%	38%	33%
State	41%	34%	25%

These results prompted the beginning of changes in the instructional methods used in the school. However, these changes had only begun to be implemented by the time the 2001-2002 state testing was administered. The results for fifth grade reading showed little improvement, as seen in table two.

Table 2

2001-2002 State Standards Testing Results for Fifth Grade Reading

	Below Standards	Meets Standards	Exceeds Standards
School	41%	49%	9%
District	31%	38%	33%
State	40%	37%	22%

While the number of students meeting state standards seemingly increased, this is evidently due to the fact that fewer students exceeded standards, moving *down*—not moving *up* from the below standards category. In this way, the school percentage of students exceeding state standards in reading was now 24 percentage points lower than the district average, even though there were 11% more students meeting the standard. There were also 10% more students than the district average failing to reach the standard, although this does represent a slight improvement from the 16% gap experienced the year before. Clearly, a problem still exists in the school regarding reading.

Looking at the sixth grade classroom at the focus of the study, the state standards test results closely mirror the school statistics. Of the eighteen students who took the test as fifth graders, 39% (seven students) were below state standards, 50%

(nine students) met the state standards, and only 11% (two students) scored above state standards.

Another assessment given to this class was the Accelerated Reader STAR Test. This computerized test presents the students with a progression of sentences containing a missing word and multiple-choice answers from which to choose the best word to complete the sentence. Each question has a time limit. The more questions the student answers correctly, the more difficult the questions become. If the student proceeds far enough into the test, the missing words begin to be part of paragraphs from actual literature. When the student makes a certain number of errors, the test stops and the student's score is calculated. The program generates a number of different forms of data for the teacher to use, and it also tracks the students over time. This test was initially administered to the class on September 27, 2002. One of the informational tools the test provides is a national percentile rank distribution summary. This information is presented in table three.

Table 3

National Percentile Rank Summary, STAR Test 9/27/02

Percentile	Students	Percent
Below 25th	10	52.6
25th to 49th	4	21.1
50th to 74th	3	15.8
75th & Above	2	10.5

This reveals that nearly 75% of the class scored below the 50th percentile. Only five students (about 25%) scored at or above the 50th percentile. Looking more

specifically at the students' scores, table four shows the grade equivalents. The average score expected of a sixth grader on that date would be a 6.08 grade equivalent.

Table 4

STAR Test Results 9/27/02

Grade Equivalent	Number of Students	Percent
2.0 – 2.9	5	26.3
3.0 – 3.9	1	5.3
4.0 – 4.9	4	21.1
5.0 – 5.9	3	15.8
6.0 – 6.9	4	21.1
10.0 – 10.9	1	5.3
12.0 – 12.9	1	5.3

Even operating on the assumption that a student could be successful in sixth grade with a reading level comparable to a fifth-grader, that still leaves 10 students, just over 50% of the class, significantly below where they ought to be. It might be interesting to note that six of these ten students were born into non-English-speaking households and most of them received bilingual services in the primary grades. Two continue to receive extra help from the bilingual teacher in writing and spelling.

The classroom teacher administered a Student Language Arts Survey (Appendix A) to determine the students' attitudes toward different language arts activities at the start of the school year. The results follow in table five.

Table 5

Student Language Arts Survey, September 2002

Part I At-School Activities

	Negative Response	Neutral Response	Positive Response
1. Self-selected reading	5%	37%	58%
2. Literature circles	54%	26%	21%
3. Teacher reading aloud	0%	16%	85%
4. Reading with a partner	15%	37%	47%
5. Class book discussion	31%	47%	21%
6. Writing topic of own choice	5%	37%	55%
7. Writing assigned topic	32%	42%	26%
8. Conferences with teacher	31%	37%	31%

Part II At-home Activities

Activity	Minutes: 0 - 15	15 – 30	30 – 60	60+
1. Reading books for fun	47%	32%	10%	10%
2. Reading other materials	56%	26%	10%	5%
3. Writing on paper (letters, etc...)	56%	21%	5%	5%
4. Reading/writing e-mail	48%	16%	16%	16%

This survey reveals that the students began the year with an overall positive attitude toward the language arts activities they had previously done in school. Four of the eight categories received a majority of positive responses, three were neutral, and only one was negative for the majority of the students. The at-home activities section

showed that the students were mostly not spending very much time engaging in literacy-related activities during their free time: in all four categories, about half of the students reported spending less than fifteen minutes per day doing any of the forms of reading or writing on the survey. While it is encouraging to see that the students have a mostly positive attitude toward classroom language arts activities, an increased amount of time spent at home engaged in reading and writing may well be of benefit to these children's success at school.

The last assessment of the students' reading abilities was through one-on-one conferences between the students and the teacher. Each student was asked to read a brief passage aloud from a book of his or her own choosing. As they read, the teacher evaluated the student's fluency and recorded the number of errors made on a simple form (Appendix B). Students were then asked some simple questions to determine their level of comprehension.

Table 6

Teacher's Anecdotal Record of Student Reading Sample

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Fluency	31%	21%	21%	26%
Comprehension	37%	42%	21%	0%

Number of Errors	0	1	2	3	4 or more
	21%	11%	31%	21%	16%

These results were somewhat better than expected, possibly because most of the students chose material that was more or less in line with their own reading levels.

Most of the students were able to read aloud from the book they had selected and respond to questions with a reasonable degree of competence. Only a small percentage of the students made a significant number of errors. Certainly there is concern that 47% of the students rated in the fair or poor categories of fluency. This meant that they read the text word-by-word, often with little regard for sentence structure, expression, or punctuation. Even these students, though, were able to answer the comprehension questions with at least a fair amount of success. This finding is also reflected in the teacher's observations of the class: the majority of students are able to function appropriately within a lesson, comprehending the material being taught in various subject areas. Even though the class as a whole does not score well on standardized tests, on a daily basis most of them are working at the level expected of sixth graders the majority of the time.

Probable Causes

What is it about this school, in particular, that has created the deficits in reading achievement? One obvious answer might be found in the school's demographics. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the school has a significantly higher number of bilingual and low-income students than the district average. Several years ago, bilingual students were grouped together in separate classes at other schools. A shift in philosophy prompted changes that kept these children at their neighborhood schools, including them in the regular classroom regardless of their level of English proficiency. It is an often-documented phenomenon that these students generally do not perform as well as their monolingual, middle-class counterparts.

Another possible explanation of the problem could lie in the history of instructional methods used at the school. Just during the past ten years, there ha been several different approaches used to teach reading, and these have not bee consistent throughout the school. Over time the school's situation has become on which the same teachers, using all manner of variations of reading curriculum (sometimes by personal choice and sometimes by district mandate), are trying to m the needs of a more widely diverse body of learners than ever before.

The process of teaching reading has a long and varied history and is infinite more complicated than simply learning the "ABC's." In order to fully understand th problem with reading at this school and across the nation, it is essential to first understand what, exactly, reading *is*. Further, an understanding of the history of reading instruction helps to shed light on the causes of the reading problems stude are experiencing in our nation today.

Reading is nothing new. Since the ancient Egyptians invented hieroglyphic people have been learning how to read and write. In those long-ago times, readin regarded as a magical power. Today, reading still has an almost magical quality t enabling the reader to travel through time and space, to become immersed in stor The printed word is our most permanent means of communication, whether it is a fictional novel or a technical computer manual. Both our stories and our informati contained in print. To access these, the reader needs two different types of readi ability. In aesthetic reading the reader enters into a world that the author and reac create together (Tolkien, 1964). The purpose of this kind of reading is to experien and enjoy. On the other hand, the goal of efferent reading is to gather facts, ideas

information, details or data. It is reading with the purpose of learning (Spiegel, 1998). As teachers, we want to nurture both kinds of reading in our students. We want them to know the joys of losing themselves in a book, being a word sponge, opening the pages of a new and enticing book and disappearing (Foxworth, 2001). We also want them to have the essential skill of reading in order to learn new material. In today's fast-changing world, where every current college student will likely graduate with knowledge that is already obsolete, the only advantage any individual can have is the ability to learn (Boulton, 2000).

But just as in ancient times, there is mystery surrounding this process of becoming a reader. Research tells us that reading must be a constructive process, in which readers create meaning and link it to their background knowledge. Reading must be fluent and strategic. Reading requires motivation. And, reading is a continuously developing skill (Kaufmann, 2000). The key question for teachers is: how do we accomplish the teaching of this process to the varied human beings who come into our classrooms each September? For some of these children, reading seems to be absorbed as naturally as learning how to speak. They become literate by listening and learning to love the language (Babbitt, 1992). For other children, learning to read comes only with great difficulty. The term "decoding" takes on meaning akin to Champollion deciphering the Rosetta Stone—an arduous labor of years. More and more, teachers see students who struggle to become proficient readers.

Educators in America throughout the last two centuries have sought to teach reading to students of many diverse abilities through several "one-size-fits-all" methods, which tended to swing between skills-based and meaning-based instruction. Today,

this debate between instructional approaches focuses on phonics vs. whole language, but these shifts in reading education have, in fact, taken many forms. From the early days of the nation to the mid-1800's, most children were taught to read using a simple alphabetic sound approach. The main textbook was the family Bible, and the teacher was most often the parent. Public schooling, usually the archetypical "one-room-schoolhouse" became more available throughout the 1800's. These schools utilized rote memorization for almost all the subjects taught. Reading was taught using a series of Primers that were heavily alphabetic/sound oriented, beginning with letters, blends, short words, longer words, then sentences (Education Week on the Web, June 5, 2002). Interestingly, in the early 1800's, progressive educator Bronson Alcott was already supportive of a balanced view of reading instruction, although it did not come to be known as such until much later. His views on teaching were evident in his daughter, Louisa May Alcott's, book *Little Men*. (Miegs, 1933; also Appendix C).

In 1842, educator Horace Mann criticized the alphabetic spelling method. Other educators developed systems of teaching students to recognize sight words before being taught letter-sound relationships. By the 1930's, when most children were being educated in public schools, teachers used a basal reader reflecting these ideas, which first taught about 50 sight words. Students were then taught letters and sounds (otherwise known as phonics) to be used as a back-up strategy after the student used meaning clues and word structure analysis to try to guess an unknown word in a sentence (Readence & Barone, 1997).

The publication of Rudolf Flesch's 1955 book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, spurred sweeping changes in basal readers and reading education. Flesch maintained that

student's reading failure was due to the lack of basic phonics education. From the early 1940's until 1965, the main publisher of basal reading textbooks was Scott, Foresman with their famous series featuring Dick, Jane, Sally and Spot. These books used a whole-word, meaning emphasis approach to teaching. There was no outside literature used in most classrooms. Decoding skills were taught after students had mastered a certain number of sight words that were used to create the vocabulary-controlled stories (Stahl, 1998).

Because of Flesch's influence, the emphasis in basal readers then shifted back to decoding and phonics education. The belief was that comprehension would be the automatic end product of successful decoding (Cooper, 1993). From 1965 to the mid-1970's, Ginn's 720 series emerged as the most popular basal. It still had a set series of characters, but there was less vocabulary control and more phonics education earlier using an analytic approach (Stahl, 1998). Reading education in the 1970's was also characterized by a direct instruction model, which focused on the theory that, if students learned enough *skills*, they'll be good readers. Comprehension was taught in some books as a series of skills, but textbook series varied widely in *which* skills were taught and in what *order* (Cooper, 1993).

By the 1980's the focus of reading education had shifted heavily to comprehension skills. Educators determined that students had become proficient decoders, but were poor at comprehension. Houghton Mifflin became the dominant publisher. Their textbooks featured re-written children's literature with reduced vocabulary. The basals of the 1980's taught comprehension through activating background knowledge (schema theory), and metacognition. There was a heavy

emphasis on comprehension skills and strategies with explicit instruction of the comprehension strategies being taught, as well as explanation of *why* the skills were important and *how* to apply them. Visuals such as story maps, semantic mapping, and graphic organizers were commonly used. Most of these books came with worksheet masters and consumable workbooks. Students commonly spent only about six minutes per day in actual reading (Stahl, 1998).

Two very influential studies were published in the 1980's. A Nation at Risk (1983) was a scathing indictment of the current system of public education. Becoming a Nation of Readers (1986) was one of the most widely read public documents, with over 300,000 copies published to date—more than any other educational book (Stahl, 1998; Kaufmann, 2000).

To address the criticisms and suggestions of these studies and to attempt to correct the shortcomings of the worksheet/skill-based basal curriculum, the emphasis in reading education shifted once again in the 1990's. Now reading was conducted according to the whole language model of instruction. In this social-activity based, language experience movement, classroom reading instruction took place in actual children's literature and in children's own writing. *Motivation* was seen to be the most important component—educators believed that if children wanted to learn to read, they would naturally do so (Stahl, 1998). Comprehension was thought to follow learning through genuine literature (Cooper, 1993). Basals were still in publication, but they became more akin to anthologies with unadapted children's literature. No vocabulary control was used and skills were hard to locate in some series at all. Previously, Directed Reading Activity (DRA), a model of pre-teaching skills/activating background

knowledge, reading, and then questioning/re-teaching was the norm. That disappeared from the basals of the 1990's. Teachers of that time saw student motivation as the primary problem in reading education. Whole language successfully addressed this, creating a new interest in reading among both students and teachers (Stahl, 1998).

Unfortunately, as students moved through school under whole language instruction, reading scores began to plummet alarmingly. In California, where the state had been in the top 20% for reading on national assessments in 1987, scores dropped to next to last in 1993 after five years of statewide whole language instruction. Illinois experienced similar results. On the state standards testing, for example, Illinois sixth graders showed a drop of 8% in just one year with a combined drop of nearly 18% over the time that whole language instruction had become commonplace (Hall, 1999).

These pendulum swings in reading education between skills-based/phonics and meaning-based/whole language approaches have often been called the Reading Wars. Do skills automatically produce meaning, or must meaning first provide the context in which to learn skills? It is much like the age-old question of which came first, the chicken or the egg: one that has never been satisfactorily answered. Veteran teachers are often frustrated by these curriculum shifts. They see successful methods thrown out, only to be replaced with methods that had been tried and rejected twenty years previously (A. Favale and L. Stolt, personal communication, January 18, 2002). Or, as Spiegel (1998) puts it, school districts are constantly searching for the silver bullet—a single program that will work for every child. When each successive program is tried and fails to be the magic answer, the district "throws the baby out with the bath water," rejecting the entire program and failing to keep the parts of it that were effective.

Research and history show that each philosophy has strengths and weaknesses. In the current backlash against the seeming failure of whole language, phonics has again gained in popularity. Current research points toward phonics instruction as being crucial to a child's success in learning how to read. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has published research findings of several scientific studies about reading instruction. They concluded that there are five key principles of effective early reading instruction: first, to teach phonemic awareness at an early age; second, to teach explicit sound-spelling correspondence; next, teaching frequent, highly regular sound-spelling relationships systematically and coordinate the introduction of each new sound with material children are asked to read; fourth, showing children exactly how to sound out words; and last, using connected, decodable text for children to practice the sound-spelling relationships that they have learned (NICHD, 1997).

In whole language programs, the strategy for figuring out an unknown word in a sentence has been to encourage the child to predict what the word might be from the context around it. Research using computer tracking of readers' eye movements disproved the former theory that good readers often skip over words they do not know. In fact, these studies show that good readers see every letter of every word on the page—they do not sample text and predict. It is the poor readers who guess from context (NICHD, 1997).

The promotion of direct instruction of skills for reading is undergoing new popularity. Many current studies support the necessity of skill instruction. As the NICHD reports suggest, systematic phonics instruction is significantly important for students in kindergarten through sixth grade and has benefits for older struggling

learners in decoding, oral reading, and spelling. Carnine, Silbert & Kameenui (1990) suggest, "There is substantial research indicating that if students are directly taught fundamental reading skills, they will learn to read." Dr. Bill Honig, the State Superintendent of Schools in California at the time of the change to whole language instruction, has since switched his position and favors a more balanced approach that includes an organized approach to teaching phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondences, and decoding skills as part of learning how to read (Hall, 1999; Honig, 1997). Honig states that researchers estimate that nearly half of special education students would not need that kind of specialized support if they had initially been taught proper decoding skills.

On the other hand, whole language programs still have much support among educators. Much of the whole language philosophy is based on what is still considered best practice in teaching, such as making learning relevant to the learners, ensuring learning has purpose and meaning, respecting the learners and their needs, and basing instruction in personal and social contexts. Whole language was meant to be integrated across the curriculum and incorporated into thematic units (Goodman, 1986). These methods are right in line with the most current brain research, which tell us that the brain thrives on social interaction such as cooperative learning, engaged learning (student discovery vs. covering content), interdisciplinary activities that promote connections within the brain, and contextual learning (Teacher Today, 2002).

Teachers, for the most part, preferred to teach according to the whole language model. Simply put, phonics and basal-based reading instruction can be deadly boring for both the teacher and the student. Basals were referred to as "teacher-proof

curriculum" and many even had scripts of exactly what teachers were supposed to say as they taught the lessons to the children (Goodman, 1986). Conversely, teachers were encouraged and energized by whole language. They had more control over the curriculum and more creative freedom (Hall, 1999). Supporters of literature-based instruction maintain that it not only teaches and perfects the skills necessary to good reading, but also to creates in students a hunger for stories. It is used to inform, transmit cultural heritage, expand imagination, and create greater understanding of the human condition in the self and in others (Burke, 1999). Many teachers were frustrated by the "skill and drill" curriculum of past years and were painfully aware of the negative effect it had on student motivation to read (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). When the same teacher, using a basal reading curriculum, has been greeted by groans from the class, and then has experienced marked enthusiasm from the students upon the shift to genuine literature, there is little motivation to go back to skills-based instruction.

Clearly, there is a rift between those who support a phonics-based method of teaching reading and whole language. Both sides claim research is supportive of their methods. Both sides can claim successes and both can point to failure in the other. We know more today than ever before what the essential skills used by good readers are. Fluent readers activate prior knowledge, determine the most important ideas in the text, ask questions, create visual images from the text, draw inferences from the text, and re-tell information. These skills are part of whole language programs. However, proficient readers also are good at sounding out and decoding words and they use "fix-up" strategies such as skipping ahead, re-reading, using context and so on, which are part of phonics programs (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). It seems that both phonics and

whole language must be part of a classroom-reading program in order to truly teach students how to become fluent readers. Unfortunately, this has become so polarized as to become a political hot-button issue, with Republican candidates lining up on the side of phonics in a "Back to Basics" type of movement and Democrats supporting whole language (Stahl, 1997).

Regardless of their political orientation, most teachers just want to find a way to best teach their students. Chasing after one "silver bullet" after another, implementing curricula that swing far to the right or left, disregarding the success of one method because of its partial failure and jumping onto yet another bandwagon—all of these have contributed to the state of declining reading achievement among students today.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clearly, based on the evidence seen throughout the history of reading instruction in America, there is no one best way to teach children. What if, instead of searching for yet another silver bullet program, the successful components of both phonics and whole language were *combined*? That is what balanced literacy instruction is all about. Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington in their book, *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write* (1999, p. xiii) state in their preface,

> The pendulum swings because people keep looking for the one best way to teach children to read and refuse to accept the fact that any parent of two children knows—you can't do things in exactly the same way and get the same results when the two children have different personalities.

Not everyone learns in the same way, so why do schools persist in trying to teach every child in the same way?

Balanced literacy is an approach through which the teacher combines skills instruction, genuine children's literature, writing, and student-selected reading. It is not just a balance of phonics and whole language, but of many components that have been part of both ways of teaching. In other words, it takes what has been learned through research and practice in both areas and combines them into a means of providing each individual student with the best possible reading education (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). Balanced literacy also incorporates a balance between reading and writing.

Students learn to read and write by reading written words and responding to reading through writing. Reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking develop simultaneously as readers grow into literacy (Cooper, 1993).

Research shows that literacy is most successfully taught when reading and writing, skills and meaning, are linked and not taught as completely separate subjects. A truly balanced program will be inclusive, not exclusive. It will not sway more towards one end of the instructional continuum or the other. It will, then, have the desired result: producing students who are lifelong readers and writers. A balanced literacy program might be best defined a decision-making approach through which a teacher makes thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help every child become a better reader and writer. It both requires and enables the teacher to reflect upon what is being done in the classroom and daily modify instruction based upon the needs of the individual learners. These modifications are drawn from a broad repertoire of strategies and a sound understanding of children, learning, and the theoretical basis of these strategies (Spiegal in Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). Balanced literacy instruction also has the effect of reaching learners through using a variety of learning styles. Students with analytic and auditory learning styles respond best to phonics. Students who are visual, tactile, and global do well under whole language. In a balanced classroom, the needs of both types of learners are met simultaneously (Stoicheva, 1999).

Balanced literacy programs are strongly supported by research and practice in much of the current published literature. The NICHD (1997) reports that phonics instruction is best implemented in a comprehensive program in which it is adapted to meet the needs of individual students. This should be a part of a complete reading

program in which students are taught phonemic awareness along with fluency and comprehension. Most well trained teachers follow their professional knowledge and use balanced strategies combining direct instruction and interesting literature (Lewis, 1997). A comment often heard in staff rooms when the subject of balanced literacy is brought up is, "Oh, you mean what good teachers have been doing for years?" (J. Gerard, personal communication, August 10, 2002). Balanced literacy does, in fact, utilize the practices and instructional strategies that teachers are already using. It just puts them together in a more deliberate way (Kirzenbaum, 2002). Independent reading of books that the students select themselves increases their fluency and motivation to read. Lessons in both reading and writing, guided by the teacher, address the needs of many learners. This instruction is modified as the year progresses and the teacher is able to assess the needs of the learners in the particular classroom. Lessons in decoding, phonemic awareness, sound-spelling relationships, and other phonics components provide more skills necessary to student success. Opportunities for students to respond to their reading both orally and in writing, time to write creatively, reading in other content areas, a classroom environment that surrounds children with the printed word, are but a few components of a balanced literacy classroom (Hall, 1999).

While most information about balanced reading instruction focuses on beginning learners, there is also a great need among many older learners who have thus far slipped through the cracks of the system. Proficiency in reading is crucial to academic achievement in middle school and high school, but far too many students at those levels lack the literacy skills they need for success. The biggest causes of reading failure in the upper grades are lack of motivation, lack of experience, and egocentricity. Through

a balanced literacy approach, teachers even at these higher grades can increase their students' reading success. In a study at Morse High School in San Diego, students identified as poor readers took a formal reading course that incorporated extensive reading and vocabulary development, writing, comprehension exercises, reading at home and listening to teachers read. After one year in this class, the students showed a gain of more than five times the mean during a comparable period of time in school (Holloway, 1999).

Balanced literacy puts a great deal of emphasis on classroom teachers and their ability to seek out and address students' individual needs. This is also backed up in research, both old and new. *The First Grade Studies*, initially published more than 30 years ago, examined many aspects in the teaching of beginning readers. They concluded that the efficacy of the teacher is more important than the method of instruction used, and that a combination of approaches works better than a single approach to instruction (Readence & Barone, 1997). Newer research shows that providing instruction in an environment that ensures a high degree of support for learners can overcome the lack of home support for literacy learning that is often prevalent in the lives of low-income or second-language learners. This lack of home support is often blamed for student failure. There are countless reports of the poor performance of students from impoverished backgrounds and students for whom English is not their native language.

Under the balanced literacy model, relying on high teacher support, the results for these at-risk learners can be remarkable. In a 1991 study by Catherine Snow (as cited by Cunningham & Allington, 1999), students who had a high degree of home

support achieved success in reading 100% of the time in classrooms with high sup
100% in classrooms with mixed support, and only 60% in classrooms with low sup
Students with low home support were also successful 100% of the time in classroo
with high support. With mixed support in the classroom, this dropped to just 25%,
in classrooms with low support there were 0% of the students who became succes
readers. Carnine, Silbert & Kameenui (1990) suggest that by blaming the students
poverty, IQ, learning or emotional disabilities, lack of readiness, or home backgrou
we minimize the importance of teaching. And Cunningham and Allington (1999, pg
state,

> ...childrens' home backgrounds can influence failure or success, but we bel
> that what happens in classrooms minute by minute actually determines how
> much will be learned. Classroom teachers are the most important factor in
> success or failure of at-risk children in our schools...they are the last and be
> hope of school and life success.

It is easy to look at the school that is the focus of this paper's study and see potential problems in the demographics of the student body. The school has a significantly higher minority and low-income population than the district average. It more students with special needs and fewer students for whom English is the prim language spoken in the home. But all students can and must learn to be literate regardless of their income, home background, or first language. It would be rather pointless to focus on these areas, because nothing within the school's power will change them. Over the years, the teachers at this school have been working dilige with seemingly less and less success, as the composition of the student body has

changed. It is tempting for the teachers to then throw up their hands and say, "Well, what do you expect? Look what we have to work with!" Allowing lower levels of achievement from these learners is unacceptable, however, especially in light of the new federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. We must move beyond the mindset that this is the best we can expect from our students given their personal backgrounds. We can proactively create a supportive environment in every classroom where teachers use the widest variety of methods possible in a balanced way to seek out and meet the needs of each individual learner.

Studies conducted by Cunningham, Hall, & Defee (1998) bear this out. They focused on three schools using the balanced literacy model, one in an urban district, one in a suburban district, and one in an extremely troubled rural district. It showed that students in all three settings achieved greater success in reading under the balanced literacy model than comparable schools using traditional reading instruction.

The question now becomes just how to implement a balanced literacy program in the school. The concept of balanced literacy is so broad, and there are so many components available for teachers to use, that the school at the focus of this study opted to use a particular model called the Four Blocks of Literacy, developed by Patricia Cunningham. This is a very popular approach; materials with the Four Blocks logo are readily available at most teacher supply stores. In Four Blocks, the skill areas of decoding and comprehension are taught during the teacher-centered Working with Words and Guided Reading blocks. These find practical application in the student-centered Writers' Workshop and Self-Selected Reading blocks, both of which rely heavily on one-on-one conferencing between the students and the teacher on a weekly

basis (Kirzenbaum, 2002). Most balanced literacy programs share similar philosophies and characteristics and include the same four components.

Phonics instruction has, in modern practice, moved away from the skill-and-drill model of the past. Students today are taught using a variety of learning modalities: clapping the syllables of the words, using Making Words and other games, word walls, nursery rhymes, words from advertising, and a host of other methods. The amount of class time spent on this area varies inversely by grade level. At first grade, 30 to 40 minutes may be spent on word skills. By sixth grade, ten to fifteen minutes two times a week may be sufficient (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Sigmon, 2001). Activities that allow students to spell and manipulate words by sorting and changing them (for example, changing the word sit to sat to set) are an essential part of the curriculum. Encouraging children to look at and play with the structure of words helps them to understand alphabetic principles (Honig, 1997). A diversity of tactics including repeated exposure to words, puzzles and "fun" activities will all have positive results in children's learning (Thompson, 1999).

In a balanced literacy program, writing is most commonly taught using a Writer's Workshop format. Students are explicitly taught the connection between reading and writing by writing about topics they select for themselves and also working on assignments given by the teacher (Shanahan, 1990). During Writer's Workshop, students may be in many different stages of the writing process at the same time. A class period typically begins with a ten-minute mini lesson in which the teacher models an aspect of writing for the class. This is followed by about 30 minutes of students working independently on their own writing, participating in peer-editing conferences,

student-teacher publishing conferences, or working on publishing their writing (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Sigmon, 2001). One example of a successful lesson combining reading and writing is a class collection of student-produced book reviews based on the books students had read during their silent reading portion of class (Cooke, 1995).

The guided reading component of balanced literacy instruction is the one that feels the most familiar to many teachers. This is the part of the instructional day in which a wide variety of materials and techniques are used: basal text, children's literature, even social studies or science text books in combination with whole-group or small-group instruction in literature skills, comprehension skills, vocabulary, or instruction in whatever skills and processes are determined by the teacher, dictated by the students' needs, and in compliance with the state standards.

Salvaging the Directed Reading Activity concept of the 1980's, teachers often use a pre-reading lesson to connect the up-coming story to the students' background knowledge, to pre-teach important vocabulary, and other pre-requisite knowledge for the story. During reading, the teacher will monitor the students' comprehension and skills as the text unfolds. Afterwards, the teacher will help the students with the skills of re-telling, summarizing, evaluating and further work in vocabulary, among other things (Marinak & Henk, 1999; Graves, 1995). Other strategies often used in guided reading are think-alouds, reciprocal teaching, and graphic organizers such as KWL charts, Venn diagrams, and story maps (Blair-Larsen & Vallance, 1999).

Instruction during guided reading focuses on constructing meaning as the goal of reading comprehension. In both aesthetic and efferent reading, students must be able

to explain information, connect it to previous knowledge, and use it. This is accomplished through modeling of the skills, guided practice, independent practice, and finally, application to real life (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Perhaps this is why guided reading seems familiar to experienced teachers, many of whom were trained according to the Madeleine Hunter seven step lesson plan. This kind of teaching tactic appears in the professional literature under many guises: scaffolding learning, cognitive apprenticeships, and transactional strategies, among other things, these usually follow a similar progression (Stahl, 1998). The instructional pattern of modeling, guided practice, then independent practice is so well-established, if it were possible to observe the teachers of scribes in Ancient Egypt, they may have used similar methods!

The essential skills of fluent readers are taught to the whole class and small groups during Guided Reading's 40 minutes; there is a wealth of instructional methodology at the teacher's disposal for this block of time. Literature Circles, book clubs, thematic units, reading-response journals, and cross-curricular units are examples of ways teachers can reach diverse learners and meet the needs of students at many levels without resorting to the old ability groups of the past (Cooper, 1993; Cunningham & Allington, 1999).

The final component of a balanced literacy program is student-selected reading. Sometimes called Reader's Workshop, Self-Selected Reading, or just SSR, this block often begins with a ten-minute teacher read-aloud, followed by 30 minutes of quiet time in which students simply read the books of their own choosing. There are a variety of ways in which students can choose these books—the school library, the public library, classroom book crates, and so on. The most successful classrooms will have the

widest possible amount of reading material provided in the classroom. These do not have to be traditional novels—so long as students are reading print, even the back of a cereal box or a travel brochure is acceptable at times.

Hundreds of correlational studies find that the best readers are those who read the most, and the poorest readers read the least. However, it is unclear whether this is because better readers simply choose to read more, or that poor readers avoid reading because it is unrewarding. Or could it actually be true, as many educators and parents have long believed, that the more a person reads, the better a reader he or she will become (NICHD, 1997)? Many teachers have incorporated silent reading into their curriculum for years but did not monitor this activity beyond making sure that each child had a book and was reading it. The difference between this and the self-selected reading of today is the level of teacher involvement. Key components of successful independent reading are adult support, appropriately challenging materials and student choice of those materials. A study by Kaufmann (2000) revealed the importance of teacher involvement in students' independent reading. Students in this study read independently at home and were assessed at school by the teacher with a bi-weekly running record. They chose their books from a sequenced progression, increasing in challenge over the course of the study. The control group was not assessed bi-weekly and their books were not sequenced in difficulty. In this study, the treatment group showed a significant increase in reading ability as compared to the control group.

Assessment of the old-fashioned, silent reading often consisted of student book reports. In a dramatic departure from this, students in self-selected reading classes today use literacy portfolios, peer sharing, and student-teacher conferences to assess

reading progress (Heiden 1999, Cunningham & Allington, 1999). In the Four Blocks model, the teacher will have a five-minute conference with each student once a week during this time (Kirzenbaum, 2002; Sigmon, 2001). Teachers keep anecdotal records from these conferences, keeping track of the books students are reading, the progress they make through these books by recording the book titles and page numbers each week. The students are asked to read aloud from their current book for a paragraph or two and the teacher makes a note of fluency and errors. Then the teacher follows up the student's reading with questions to assess comprehension. This is the ideal opportunity to identify students' individual difficulties in reading and to offer one-on-one support in a private manner (Rhodes, 1993). There are useful tools available for teachers to keep an on-going assessment of student reading levels such as the Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 2001) or running records (Kaufmann, 2000). It is also the perfect time to probe the students' attitudes toward reading, discuss books, and lead students to books written at an appropriate level (Booth, 1996).

The student-teacher reading conference is perhaps the most important element in the balanced literacy program. Williams (1999) describes the teaching cycle in a balanced literacy classroom: first, teachers must find out exactly what children know. Then they need to design learning experiences to take the students from the known and lead them to the unknown. Teachers subsequently help the children succeed through explicit teaching, independent practice, assisted discovery, positive feedback, questioning, and metacognitive activities. Following this, teachers continuously evaluate children's progress, which leads back to further discovery of what the children know, beginning the cycle yet again. The individual reading conference is the prime

opportunity to discover what students know, what they don't know, and how to tailor instruction to them as individuals and as a group.

Upon reflection, balanced literacy instruction is rather akin to the classic game of Bombardment. In this game, children line up on opposite sides of the school gym and throw balls at each other. When children are hit, they're out. In balanced literacy, we throw all the balls we can; every kind of instruction from phonics to whole language, and chances are good that we'll hit all the students at some point. The reading conference is the key to insuring that we aim accurately and prevent students from hiding in the corners.

Project Objective and Processes

As a result of the student-teacher reading conferences and individualized instruction occurring as a result of this process, in conjunction with school-wide implementation of the Four Blocks of Literacy model of instruction, students in the targeted sixth grade class will increase their reading levels. Measurements of student achievement will include the STAR test, individual reading inventories, teacher's anecdotal records, and student surveys.

In order to accomplish this objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Materials utilizing the balanced literacy approach to teaching will be gathered. These include a Word Wall bulletin board, a wide selection of books and other reading material for the classroom library, and record-keeping worksheets for both student and teacher use.

2. A series of learning activities that address reading skills, as set forth in the State Standards, will be incorporated into existing curricular reading units to be used in the Guided Reading portion of instruction.
3. Mini-lessons for the Writing portion of instruction will be constructed.
4. Working with Words lessons and activities will be planned and materials such as worksheets duplicated.
5. As needed throughout the learning process, materials will be collected and developed to support emerging student needs. Guided reading lessons may be planned in advance, but instructional needs determined during conferences will have to be addressed upon their discovery. To facilitate this, the school librarian, the principal, and the district instructional coordinator will be a vital support to the teacher.

Project Action Plan

Week 1: Establish routines and procedures; engage class in activities building classroom community—both essential to smooth running Self-Selected Reading (SSR) and Writing blocks (explained in depth below), during which students must be able to function independently while teacher is conferencing with individual students.

Administer STAR test to class in computer lab. (Appendix D)

Administer student language arts survey. (Appendix E)

Begin Guided Reading block using the novel *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (see Appendix F for an annotated bibliography of novels used in the project) as the basis for the first six weeks of instruction. During Guided Reading the teacher leads the class in instruction on specific reading skills using many different kinds of text ranging from

basal readers to novels to non-fiction sources such as a social studies textbook. Instruction is many faceted, incorporating multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, authentic assessment, partner reading, whole-class instruction and many other methods. In this unit the skills taught will focus on summarizing, prediction, understanding plot, and understanding character emotions. The class will work in cooperative groups for many of the activities, although there will also be opportunity for individual work and ample whole class instruction. This block is approximately 40 minutes in length each day.

Collect baseline writing sample. This will not be graded, but will be kept in a student portfolio until the end of the school year to evaluate the student's growth. An additional sample of the student's writing will be added at the end of each trimester during the year.

Week 2: Begin Self-Selected Reading (SSR) block. During this 30-minute time students read books of their own choosing. Students are divided into groups and each group has a book bin full of reading material. These bins are regularly rotated and the contents rearranged so that student interest remains high. Students may also read material they bring from home, from the school library, or the public library. While the students are reading silently, the teacher holds a five-minute individual conference with approximately five students each day.

Conferences include such things as discussion about the student's choice of books and discussion of the plot and theme of the student's chosen book in order to assess the student's comprehension of the story. The student will read a short passage from the book aloud so that the teacher may assess reading fluency and the student's

use of skills such as decoding of unfamiliar words. Skills taught in Guided Reading will also be integrated in the conferences. For example, if the class is studying prediction the teacher may ask the student to make a prediction of what will happen next in the novel they have selected for SSR. This is recorded in the teacher's anecdotal notes and used as a means of assessing the student's transfer of learning from one block to another, along with notes regarding the other aspects of the conference. During week two, the teacher will administer the individual reading inventory during this time instead of conferences, both for the purpose of collecting data and to allow the students to have time to begin reading their books.

Begin Writing block. This 40 minute time period begins with a ten-minute mini lesson about a specific writing skill. The teacher offers modeling of the skill and brief instruction. For the remainder of the time, students are engaged in writing. About two-thirds of the time they write about topics of their own choosing. The other third of the time students will write according to teacher assignment, which may link to Guided Reading or other subject areas, or it may focus on a particular skill such as writing a persuasive essay. As in the SSR block, students will have a weekly five-minute conference with the teacher to discuss their writing. Students are expected to write the entire time during the allotted class. They ought to be at all different stages of the writing process at all different times. Expectations will be set with the class about the number of completed assignments, due dates and so forth, but students have a great deal of creative freedom. No conferences will be held during week two, in order to give students time to create a piece of writing.

Begin Working With Words (WWW) block. This block is much less elaborate and involved at the intermediate level than in the primary grades. By sixth grade, most students are more or less proficient at decoding skills and should have a basic level of phonemic awareness. Because of this, the focus will be word patterns at higher levels, origin of words, and so on. It will occur three times a week for approximately 10 minutes each time.

Week 3: Begin conferencing during SSR and Writing blocks.

Continue *Hatchet* unit in Guided Reading.

Continue WWW according to the needs and interests of the class. If the writing or reading conferences show a need for specific skill instruction by several students in the class, this is a grand opportunity to provide that teaching. For example, if many students show confusion between there/they're/their, the teacher may conduct a WWW lesson on that topic.

Week 4 – 15: From this point forward activities will support and develop student literacy according to the procedures set forth above. Once *Hatchet* is completed, the class will use its sequel, *Brian's Winter,* followed by other literature including selected stories from the basal reader. Guided Reading instruction will focus on skills drawn from the State Standards. WWW, SSR, and Writing blocks will continue along the established pattern for the remainder of the school year, also emphasizing necessary skills.

Week 16: Administer individual reading inventory during SSR conference time.

Administer STAR test in the computer lab. (Appendix G)

Administer follow-up student survey in the classroom. (Appendix H)

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effectiveness of the intervention, the students will be given two tests at the beginning and at the end of the time period. One of these is the STAR test, which determines the student's reading level through a computer-administered vocabulary test. The other is a teacher-administered individual reading inventory, which is another method for determining the student's reading level. Also at the beginning and end of the intervention students will be given a survey to determine their attitudes toward reading and other language arts activities. Throughout the intervention, the teacher will keep anecdotal records during the reading conferences. These will also be used to assess student learning.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase the reading levels of the students in the targeted sixth grade class. This was to be accomplished through the implementation of a balanced literacy program. The school at the site of this study adopted the Four Blocks of Literacy model of instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 1999), beginning in the winter of 2002. In this study, there was a particular focus on student-teacher conferences as a part of the Self-Selected Reading block of literacy instruction, in conjunction with the three other blocks in the program: Guided Reading, Writing, and Working With Words. At the start of the school year, the parents of the students in the class signed letters granting consent for their children to participate in this study (Appendix I). A Spanish copy of the letter was also given parents of the bilingual students (Appendix J). All of the students signed a similar letter of consent to participate in the study (Appendix K).

For the purposes of this section of the paper, first person narrative was used to facilitate the flow of information. All students have been given fictitious names in order to protect their identities.

This school year began on a very positive note. I had a much smaller class than I'd had for the past few years—only 20 students—and the children exhibited much

better classroom behavior than many sixth grade classes I have taught. After the f two weeks of team building and get-acquainted activities, we settled down to the a business of teaching and learning, implementing the Four Blocks of Literacy just as rest of our school was doing. The difference between my classroom and the rest o school was that I was looking at this instruction in a more critical, scientific way for purposes of this intervention. I also was being more deliberate in the way I manag the Self-Selected block within my classroom.

Guided Reading

We began with the novel *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, which the students real seemed to like. My main instructional focus was on the skill of summarizing. Over years, I've noticed that sixth graders really do not understand how to do this very w When asked to summarize they either give a pitifully inadequate answer: "This kid on a plane, and...uh...I forgot," or they re-tell the entire chapter they had been rea usually as one long run-on sentence, "This kid, Brian, was on a plane because his parents had gotten a divorce and before he got on the plane his mom gave him a hatchet and he was going to visit his dad in Canada and then the pilot of the plane a heart attack and then the plane crashed in a lake and the kid, Brian, had to swim shore and then the mosquitoes bit him all over and then..."

Our novel study followed the pattern of assigning the class a chapter to rea then allowing some class time for them to accomplish this. Most days they were al choose to read alone silently, read aloud with a partner or with a small group, or sometimes they could also choose to listen and follow along while I read aloud. Fo

couple of the key chapters, I read aloud to the whole class. There were also a few occasions when we ran out of time and I assigned the chapter for homework.

During the following class period, we would begin by discussing the chapter from the previous day. I would often imbed other reading skills such as understanding plot, prediction, and understanding character emotions at this time. Then we would write a summary of the chapter on the overhead. The students were asked to keep a log of these. For the first few chapters, I just modeled how to summarize—thinking through the process aloud, discussing what were important pieces of information and what were just details. As we progressed through the novel, the summaries became less a product of my instruction and more the result of student input. Finally, for the last few chapters of the book, the students had to write their own summaries all by themselves. The collection of summaries was turned in at the end of the unit and graded.

Assessments from the unit besides the summaries were a project and a multiple-choice test. For the project, the students could choose from a list of things to do that related to the multiple intelligences. For example, visual or interpersonal learners could design a board game related to the main character's experiences of surviving in the wilderness. Verbal learners could write an alternative ending to the story. Naturalists and logical thinkers could research the climate, geography, or plants and animals of the story. There were many possibilities. Interestingly, most of the students chose the board game option. On the day they presented their projects, we allowed time to play each other's games. The students learned a great deal about the quality of their own work as they participated with their peers in playing the games they had designed.

The test was fairly basic and straightforward. Based on the learning from our Authentic Assessment class, I modified the sequence of events section of the test: previously, students were asked to number a list of events from the story 1 to 10 in the order they occurred; however, this tripped up many students in the past—if one statement was numbered out of sequence, the entire section could be ruined. This time, I changed this section of the test to a series of 10 pairs of statements in which students had to choose which of the two events happened first. The test also included an essay question at the end, worth about 20% of the total test score.

We followed this with one of the novel's sequels, *Brian's Winter*. The class indicated that it was an easier novel to read, mostly because they were already familiar with the setting and character, and with the author's writing style. Instruction was focused on prediction and questioning strategies, although mainly through discussion in class. A project and a test were used as assessments for this novel unit.

Writing

During the course of the writing block, we did a wide variety of things. Each trimester, I required that the students turn in six finished pages of their own free-choice writing. Some class time was often given for this, but they were well informed that much of it might need to be done at home. We also did six assigned pieces of writing per trimester. These included a persuasive essay entitled, "If I Were Principal," an expository essay called, "The Best Pet," and a narrative about, "My Most Memorable Holiday."

Working With Words

I did not do a great deal of direct instruction in this block. I began the year with the Word Wall bulletin board set that was provided to all the classrooms in our school. Every two weeks I would take 20 words and give a pre-test on them. The five words that were missed most often became the Words of the Week. I put them in a pocket chart on the Word Wall and we said them aloud, clapped them as we spelled them aloud, practiced them with a partner...we tried many things to help the students learn the spelling words. At the end of the week we had a test.

After finishing the spelling unit, I embedded Working With Words into the context of other subject areas instead of making it a separate lesson three times a week as in the original plan. Part of the reason for this change was due to time constraints, and part of it was because I was beginning to see that this group of students responded more positively with less overt instruction.

The students' writing was often the source for inspiration of these mini-lessons. For example, on a recent writing assignment there were many students who confused "fell" and "feel". I also noticed many errors in which students have selected the wrong choice in Spell-Check on their home computers. These provided perfect opportunities for brief instruction. Another example was found in social studies. We were learning about Ancient Greece, so I often pointed out how Greek word parts show up in all kinds of places besides history—math, science, literature, and other places as well.

Self Selected Reading (SSR)

The first component of this block was Read Aloud, which I did for 15 minutes every day right after lunch. I deliberately chose books that would be of high interest to

the students but were written above most of the students' independent reading level. The first book we listened to was *Among the Hidden* by Margaret Haddix. Utilizing a novel like this that has several sequels (*Among the Impostors, Among the Betrayed*) often inspires students to read further after I finish reading the novel aloud in class. Following this, I chose *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, a very powerful and compelling novel. I had to do some "verbal editing" as I read it in order to censor some of the bad language the characters use, but the reaction from the class was very good. Near the end of the novel, several of the students wondered aloud why such a good story hadn't been made into a movie yet. The following day, two children showed up in class with information they had found on the Internet, telling about the progress of the up-coming movie! For the next book, I asked the class to vote on what kind of book they would like to hear next—one of the sequels to *Ender's Game*, or switch to something entirely different. They decided on *Ender's Shadow*, an unusual sequel in which the author tells the same story from another character's point of view. It raised some very interesting discussions among the students.

Two unexpected new aspects were added to the SSR block at the beginning of the year. The first happened during a meeting of the intermediate teachers. In revising our letter to parents about the homework policy, we added the expectation that students would read at home for 20 minutes, four nights a week. I had not considered requiring at-home reading as homework before, but I really took this to heart. I emphasized to my students time and again that reading was their most important homework every night. I also allowed for many variations on this theme: reading books in the students' native languages, reading aloud to younger siblings, reading Internet material, reading

magazines and newspapers, being read aloud to by parents or others…the possibilities extended far beyond sitting alone in a corner with a novel. Students were asked to keep a log, which their parents initialed each night that reading occurred. These logs were turned in at the end of the month. I counted these as a significant part of each child's reading grade.

The second unexpected addition to our reading program was a new district reading initiative called Soar to Success (usually just referred to as Soar). The lowest readers in each class, though not students with Individual Education Plans, were selected to receive additional reading instruction in a small group setting for 45 minutes each day. This pull-out program was not supposed to remove the students from the Guided Reading block, nor replace classroom reading instruction. When I set up my classroom schedule this fall, I reserved the entire afternoon for Four Blocks without designating specific time periods for each block. I wanted to be able to be flexible about the scheduling of the blocks within this time so that I could change the order and pacing of instruction as needs arose. In order to meet the needs of the Soar students, I rotated the instructional blocks so that they would not consistently miss out on one area or another. I also modified the required workload for them—assigning fewer writing assignments and expecting different levels of performance on projects for Guided Reading.

To begin SSR, I asked the class to help me re-organize my classroom library. In previous years it really raised the children's interest in books when they actually got their hands on them. We spread the books out on the desks all around the room. Then the kids were instructed to "go shopping" and choose three books per person. They

were really excited about this, and enthusiastically collected books, often having to "negotiate" over the more popular titles.

The traditional model of Four Blocks advocates the use of book bins: small groups of students share a bin stocked with a variety of reading material. The bins should be periodically rotated between groups to provide higher interest. In my classroom, each child had access to the books bins. The students were asked to put the books they had chosen in their group's bin, and I added other reading materials to their collection—magazines, pamphlets, even empty cereal boxes were sometimes included. Many teachers require that their students keep the books in the bin at all times except during SSR, but I wanted to encourage them to read these selections at home, too. Children can become confused having one book at home, one in class, yet another for Guided Reading, and still another for the on-going teacher read aloud. Therefore, my students were allowed to keep one book at a time from the bin in their possession. As insurance against the dangers of a sixth grader's desk and backpack, I gave them each a gallon-size zip-lock bag in which to keep the books they were currently reading.

For the first few weeks of the intervention, someone from the group would bring the bin over and set it in the middle of the square of desks at the start of SSR each day. It soon became apparent that nobody ever opened the bins. Children only read the books they had chosen during their first "shopping trip." Based on student questions and comments during conferences, I decided to re-arrange the book bins by topic. We spread the books all out again and spent a class period organizing them into my six bins: realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, non-fiction, and easy readers. I also

added a box of magazines. At first, the magazine collection was very popular, especially the old issues of *Hot Rod* and *National Dragster* my brother donated to the class. After just a week or two, I observed once again that students were not really using the bins once they had selected books for themselves as we reorganized the collection. The students using the bins were more often seeking a way of avoiding reading. "I'm looking for a new book," sometimes lasted for the entire SSR time.

Finally, in response to the lack of book bin usage, I opened up the selection process to all other books from any other sources possible: books from home, our school library, the public library, magazines and newspapers from home...whatever material students could find was fair game (so long as it was not inappropriate for school, of course.)

Student-teacher reading conferences were supposed to begin about a week after the start of SSR. I had planned to do a basic reading inventory for each of the students as a baseline measurement of their reading abilities, but as time flew by without my becoming familiar enough with the procedures of this assessment, I decided to substitute a running record. Using a tape recorder, I asked each student to read a passage from our social studies text aloud. In that way I could analyze their errors later on and get started with the actual business of SSR.

Beginning about three weeks into the school year, each time the class was reading silently, I called the students up to my desk individually. I recorded the titles of the books they were reading and the current page number. The students were asked to tell me what their books were about, and then asked to read a paragraph or two aloud.

While the students read, I made notes about their fluency and decoding. Afterwards, I followed up with a few comprehension questions.

My original goal was to conference with four students every day. Multiplied by five days a week, at that rate I should have been able to conference with each student on a weekly basis. Once again, things did not go exactly as I had planned. So many things crept up and stole time away: assemblies, parent conferences, standardized testing, special programs, overload in other subject areas, pull out programs, class parties, teacher in-service days, special projects…every week there was something that intruded on the time for conferences. My supposedly flexible schedule often sacrificed SSR, even though it was supposed to be the most important of the Four Blocks. In actuality, conferences were held about every two or three weeks.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Guided Reading

The modified sequence of events section on the *Hatchet* test was more user-friendly than the version I had used in the past. The students' projects showed evidence of learning; although, as in any class, there were a few students who did the minimal amount of work and did not seem to benefit as much as I had hoped. I found that the class as a whole was more successful with this format for projects and presentations than others had been in the past. They showed growth in their ability to summarize text, which carried over into other subject areas.

Interestingly, the class did not do well on the test for *Brian's Winter*. I learned from this that the test I had written was too detail oriented. Their projects, on the other hand, were even better than for *Hatchet*. One group of boys brought in some really

amazing items to show the class. In part of the novel, the main character kills and skins a deer. These boys brought in both a tanned deer hide and a raw, dried, blood-stained deerskin, the souvenir of one boy's a recent hunting trip with his step-dad. The class was very impressed at being able to see and touch the actual artifacts.

Writing

In reading the children's initial attempts at writing, I saw a real need for instruction in composing better introductions and conclusions. The students' first work was boring, repetitive, and altogether too short. To address this, I did several lessons, modeling how to write these essential parts of an essay. I also weighted the grading rubric I used, increasing the point value of these parts of their work in order to encourage them to take the writing of introductions and conclusions more seriously.

An encouraging outcome of the students' writing progress has been shown in the way the students began to write more creatively for their free-choice writing. During the first part of the year, the children had a tendency to write one five-paragraph essay after another. As they gained confidence and skill, many of the children began to experiment with plays, dialog, and poetry. In fact, so many of them were using these other forms of composition that I designed units on poetry, script writing, and using quotations in order to give direction on how to use the correct punctuation and format for these different kinds of writing.

Working With Words

All but two of the children were very successful in the spelling unit. Both of the children who were still struggling with spelling had special needs, one with a speech and language disability and the other with problems differentiating between English and

Spanish spelling patterns. These children receive help outside of the classroom from special service teachers. For word study, the class seemed to connect with the topic much more when it is put in an authentic setting, rather than a separate unit of "Vocabulary Study."

Self-Selected Reading

Having three students out of the room every afternoon for Soar proved to be a problem. Even though I rotated the instruction times so that they did not consistently miss any one thing, they ended up missing out on everything to a certain extent. The students certainly benefited from the instruction they received in Soar, but they were behind their peers in Guided Reading, participated in far fewer writing lessons, and were not present on many occasions for SSR, resulting in fewer student-teacher reading conferences for each of them. I am not at all certain that Soar was worth it for them in the long run.

The students' reaction to and usage of the book bins during SSR provided many insights for me. They only read the books they had chosen on our "shopping" days and were not at all interested in the other things in the collection. Once students selected a book to read, most of them kept reading it until they were finished or gave up on it. It was at this point, about three weeks into the intervention, that I had my first real insight: sixth graders don't choose books in the same way as younger children. First graders read books that take ten minutes from start to finish. They need a lot of reading material in front of them to keep busy for an entire SSR block. Sixth graders, on the other hand, might spend several weeks on the same novel (especially if they are only reading it during SSR) because their books are quite long. In fact, the book bins could

be more distracting than helpful to a few students, providing a means of avoiding reading, "I'm browsing," instead of digging into a novel.

My second real insight occurred shortly afterwards. Many of the students were not very inspired by my selection of books. They would say, "Don't you have any mysteries?" or, "Aren't there any survival books?" Another light bulb began to glow in my head. My students were already aware of what they liked to read and what they were looking for in a book. This lead to the realization that most older students choose books by topic, genre, or favorite author. The cover art is important, but only within the student's preferred kind of book. A child who likes fantasy stories will not choose to read a historical novel, no matter how appealing the cover might be.

I have been collecting books for many years. Some of my personal library dates back to when I was a seventh grader, ordering from Scholastic Book Club in junior high reading class, circa 1975! I realized that all my books, even those I have purchased since becoming a teacher, were all books I liked. My collection was heavy on fantasy and historical fiction, but very low on mystery and any kind of non-fiction. No wonder many students failed to find something to read in the book bins! It was because of this insight—what *I* like to read is clearly not what motivates all of *my students* to read—that I modified the original guidelines for classroom reading material to include whatever the students could find. I also remembered back to my own attitude towards reading in elementary school. Until the end of sixth grade, if it weren't about a horse, I wouldn't read it. Period. Why should I expect my students to be different?

Certainly, in the future, I need to be more deliberate about choosing books to add to my classroom library in order to expand the selection and meet the needs and

interests of more diverse students. But, since it's not really possible to build a book collection comprehensive enough to meet the needs of every student, I also realized that it would be really valuable to have a catalog of children's literature, organized by genre, that gave a brief description of each book and listed its reading level. With a tool like this, it would be easier to guide intermediate students in selecting books from other sources that they would enjoy and might actually read.

Even with the glitches in time management, student schedules, and so on, conferencing was the most valuable time I spent with students this year. Not only was it an effective tool for assessing the students as individual readers, it also served as a way for me to build relationships with them, and to encourage them in their reading progress. I quickly saw that most of my students were already proficient readers. Even those with the lowest initial test scores were able to decode or use appropriate strategies for deciphering unfamiliar words as they read aloud, and they readily answered comprehension questions. Our discussions about their books were usually productive, especially if we were talking about a novel with which I was familiar.

Natalie (all student names are fictitious), who scored at the 10th grade on her first STAR test, was especially enjoyable to talk to. We shared similar interests in books and I could have had very long conferences with her if others hadn't been waiting.

Eddie's first STAR was a 12.9+, the highest possible score. His book selections were advanced, things like *Treasure Island* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Since Eddie was clearly capable of reading anything he wanted to, I just enjoyed our conversations and encouraged him to broaden his interests into genres he had not yet experienced.

Kaylie was another girl with whom it was fun to discuss books. When she said she liked books about animals, I found my copy of *James Herriott's Dog Stories* for her. As she read it, I would ask her, "Did you get to the story about Tricky-Woo yet?"

"Oh, yes!" she said, "It was great! I really liked the one about Roy, too." Those moments of connection with students are what make teaching fun.

Diana started off slowly with self-selected reading, even though she was a very bright student. She flitted from one book to another without really ever finding something she genuinely liked. She said she was reading books in Polish at home, at her father's insistence. I encouraged her in this, reminding her that it is truly a gift to be fluent in two languages. Diana' first STAR test was lower than I had thought it would be, given her exceptional verbal skills.

On the other hand, Stephanie was an example of a student who showed the kind of improvement during conferences that I had been hoping to see. She was a very conscientious student and was faithful about reading at home and about challenging herself with books at or above her appropriate reading level. She always finished any book she started and was able to discuss them with wit and intelligence.

Doug was one of the students in the Soar program. This surprised me, because, as the younger brother of a former student, I had known him for a long time and had always seen him exhibiting many characteristics of a gifted child. During our conferences I quickly saw that his comprehension and decoding were actually good, but he had an extremely slow reading rate. However, he also had intellectual abilities far in advance of an average sixth grader. He would get frustrated by his own slow pace with visual material, which did not match the speed or level at which he could comprehend

auditorially, and he would give up on reading. I encouraged him to be patient with himself, and also to try listening to books on tape at home. He showed much improvement over the year, especially in his belief in his own reading ability.

For seven of the nineteen students in my class, English is a second languag Jesenia moved to America from Mexico when she was in third grade and recently transitioned out of the bilingual program into the regular classroom. English vocab has been her greatest struggle, especially in content areas. Her oral reading revea many things about her reading abilities. In a selection from *Hatchet*, she read the "rifle" as "raffle" and just kept going past it. When she was finished, I directed her to that sentence and asked her to sound out the word. Then I asked her its meani She didn't know. When I told her it was a gun, she said, "Oh!" obviously surprised asked her if she had thought it was weird that he would have a raffle ticket in the survival pack. "Yes, it didn't make any sense," she said. I used that opportunity fo personalized mini-lesson about the reading strategies of stopping to check her understanding when things don't make sense, and then looking around for meanin the surrounding text.

Four of the bilingual children were born in America to immigrant parents and not begin learning English until they were enrolled in school. None of them receive bilingual services, yet they still show difficulties in English at times. Josephina and Mayra also had incidents similar to Jesenia's during reading conferences with me, misunderstanding or failing to recognize vocabulary words in the stories they had selected. The two girls' initial STAR tests showed them reading well below grade

However, they both proved to be honor roll students, good writers, and showed strong comprehension of classroom instruction, discussing grade-level material competently.

Mayra and I had a few discussions about the disparity between her low test scores and high achievement in the classroom. I asked her if she sometimes got mixed up between English and Spanish. She admitted that she did, and also said that the tests made her feel very anxious, so she did not do her best. I observed that Josephina often moved her lips as she read silently, pronouncing the words to herself to enhance her comprehension. She also felt anxious about tests. Both girls did not feel that STAR and other standardized tests truly reflected their abilities. They did a good job at selecting books to read that they enjoyed and could read independently. Once they became convinced that they were more competent readers than their test scores indicated, they began to choose higher-level books. Before, they believed they had to limit themselves to the books at their tested reading level. As the intervention progressed, they gained the confidence they needed in order to read "outside of the box," so to speak.

Additionally, all of the Spanish-speaking students took turns translating for a classmate who came to school straight from Mexico at the beginning of the school year. (This student was not part of this study, since she did not speak any English.) Translation is difficult work, and I think it demonstrated further proof of these students' intelligence and ability far beyond their test scores.

Other students did not respond as well to the conferences. Krissy seemed to like to talk to me, but she did not finish a book during the entire course of the intervention. She began the year at sixth grade level according to all her testing, but showed little

progress. Krissy just flitted from book to book, never settling down long enough to gain from the experience of reading.

Danielle repeatedly scored well below grade level on every kind of testing—standardized, STAR, and classroom content tests—because of her high level of test anxiety. Her oral reading and responses to comprehension questions were appropriate for a sixth grade student, even though she showed up as well below average on paper. Like Krissy, she made little progress with her reading because she could never seem to find a book that would hold her interest for long. At one point, Danielle became very enthusiastic about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I was so encouraged by this that I even allowed her to read it under her desk while she was supposed to be working on something else. However, she fizzled out on the book all too soon. A famous Danielle quote was, "Why read books? All the good ones end up getting made into movies, anyway."

To this Doug responded, "But the books are *always* better than the movies!"

Jennifer was very shy during conferences. She continued to be uncomfortable with conversation throughout the year, rarely making eye contact. Towards the very end of the intervention period she found a book series she really liked, and her discussions finally became more animated as long as we could talk about her *Wild at Heart* books.

Scarlett kept bringing the same book, in which she was clearly not interested, to our reading conferences for many weeks. She admitted to *pretending* to read most of the time in class. She openly said that she did not read at all at home, and she never turned in any of her reading logs. Her first STAR test was only at 2.4 grade level. She

freely said that she had a bad attitude during the first test. That score, however, resulted in her placement in the Soar program for several weeks, until her attitude improved enough to allow her to prove she was a competent reader. Her very next test STAR test placed her at 6.2, proving that she had let the chip on her shoulder get in her way the first time around.

There were several boys whose conferences offered interesting insights into their attitudes toward reading. Michael did not do his first two months of reading logs. When I asked him about this, he said that he had been helping his step-dad put a new ceiling in their garage workroom. He genuinely felt that his experience in learning about construction was more valuable than time spent reading. After they completed the project, and also after a pointed letter I sent home with the entire class in January re-emphasizing the importance of at-home reading and its connection to the students' grades, Michael began to read more and showed good progress.

Matt was another student of this sort. Active in the school broadcast studio, park district athletic programs and Scouting, Matt did not find that he had much time or interest outside of school for reading. In our discussions, I had the distinct impression that Matt's abilities were far in excess of his performance. When I was reading *Ender's Game*, however, Matt became very interested. He checked his own copy out of the public library so that he could read ahead and find out what was going to happen next. (I swore him to secrecy so that he wouldn't spoil the plot twists for the other students.) This book was certainly written well above a sixth grade reading level, yet Matt was able to read it easily on his own and discuss the important themes with intelligence and

excellent comprehension. Not bad for a student who scored exactly average on his first STAR test.

Johnny was a huge *Harry Potter* fan. Since I have read all the books multiple times myself, reading conferences were always a pleasure with him. We shared favorite characters and discussed the differences between the books and the movies.

Jorge showed little progress throughout the intervention. He did not finish very many books, was usually not readily able to re-tell what he had read, and mumbled and muttered when reading aloud. He did not ever seem comfortable talking about reading, or even interacting with me in other situations, for that matter. However, his classroom performance in Guided Reading and in other content areas was strongly at grade level, except for missing work at times. Jorge spoke Spanish at home, but always maintained that it was not at all a factor in his school performance.

Of the two other children in the Soar program, one showed better than expected progress while the other demonstrated a decline in his scores. Samir, who received speech and language services in addition to Soar, struggled more with reading than any other student in the class. He liked to discuss what he was reading, but had trouble re-telling a story in a logical and coherent manner. I really admired the way he would tenaciously keep on, even though it was hard for him.

On the other hand, Jose was a happy-go-lucky sort who did not apply himself to his reading or, in fact, to most of his schoolwork. His STAR scores were the lowest in the class, yet he could completely surprise me with his intelligent contributions to class discussions and his quick understanding whenever instructional methods involved hands-on activities. Because Jose was out of the classroom so much, both to receive

additional writing instruction in the bilingual classroom and for Soar, I had the fewest number of reading conferences with him. He never turned in any at-home reading logs and had a problem with missing assignments across all subject areas.

At the end of the intervention period, I had high hopes that all of the students would show good improvement in their test scores. I felt that the conferences had been very successful overall, and that the students had grown as readers beyond what I had seen in student performance when other instructional methods were used in the past.

Post-intervention state standards test data for this group of students was not available, due to the fact that this test is administered to students in fifth grade, but not again until eighth grade. The planned objective means of data collection to assess student growth were the STAR test, which was given on four occasions, student reading and language arts attitude surveys, and teacher's anecdotal records, including an individual reading inventory.

Much to my surprise and disappointment the class did not do well at all on the STAR test given at the end of the intervention. (Appendix G) The first test was given at 6.11 grade placement in the school year, and the last test was given at 6.66, a difference of 0.55. An average student, therefore, ought to show at least 0.55 grade equivalent of growth during that time. Instead, the class averaged 0.40. This information is shown in table seven.

Table 7

STAR Test Results 9/27/02 and 3/20/03

Grade Equivalent	Number of Students		Percent	
	Sept	March	Sept	March
2.0 – 2.9	5	2	26.3	9.5
3.0 - 3.9	1	0	5.3	0
4.0 – 4.9	4	6	21.1	31.8
5.0 – 5.9	3	3	15.8	15.8
6.0 – 6.9	4	5	21.1	23.8
7.0 – 7.9	0	1	0	5.3
8.0 – 8.9	0	1	0	5.3
10.0 – 10.1	1	1	5.3	5.3
12.0 – 12.9+	1	0	5.3	0

The students also demonstrated negative growth in percentile rank, from an average national percentile rank of 27 in September to a rank of 25 in March, as seen in table eight.

Table 8

National Percentile Rank Summary, STAR test 9/27/02 and 3/20/03

Percentile	Students		Percent	
	Sept.	March	Sept.	March
Below 25th	10	11	52.6	52.4
25th to 49th	4	7	21.1	33.3
50th to 74th	3	2	15.8	9.5
75th and above	2	1	10.5	4.8

This data did not match my experiences with these students. Some of the individual student's scores were exceptionally strange. From her first test in September to the last test in March, Natalie declined by –4.25 grade levels. Eddie declined by –2.75. How in the world could the two strongest readers in the class go down that far? Conversely, Scarlett gained +3.75 grade levels, even though she was not even

pretending to try to become a better reader. A report showing all the students' test results for both fifth and sixth grades showed patterns going up and down. Some students' highest scores were seen in fifth grade. Some did, in fact, demonstrate upward trends in the expected patterns, but others bounced around like jumping beans.

There was no way I could believe that these children had become *worse* readers during the time we had been working together. My anecdotal records (as seen in the narrative above) showed that all of the students had progressed in one way or another; if not actually in self-selected reading, then in their classroom performance in other areas.

The same student attitude survey given at the beginning of the project was re-administered at the end. Few of the results showed significant change. The exceptions to this pattern are highlighted in table nine, below. (Appendix H)

Table 9

Student Language Arts Survey, September 2002 and March 2003

Part I At-School Activities

	Negative Response		Neutral Response		Positive Response	
	Sep	Mar	Sep	Mar	Sep	Mar
1. Self-selected reading	5%	28%	37%	28%	58%	44%
2. Literature circles	54%	44%	26%	56%	21%	5%
3. Teacher reading aloud	0%	0%	16%	0%	85%	100%
4. Reading with a partner	15%	17%	37%	22%	47%	61%
5. Class book discussion	31%	17%	47%	44%	21%	39%
6. Writing topic of own choice	5%	28%	37%	39%	55%	33%
7. Writing assigned topic	32%	28%	42%	44%	26%	28%
8. Conferences with teacher	31%	5%	37%	44%	31%	50%

Part II At-home Activities

Activity	Minutes: 0 - 15		15 – 30		30 – 60		60+	
	Sep	Mar	Sep	Mar	Sep	Mar	Sep	Mar
1. Reading books for fun	47%	17%	32%	33%	10%	11%	10%	39%
2. Reading other materials	56%	55%	26%	22%	10%	11%	5%	11%
3. Writing on paper (letters, etc...)	56%	61%	21%	17%	5%	11%	5%	11%
4. Reading/writing e-mail	48%	56%	16%	11%	16%	11%	16%	22%

On the positive side, the survey shows that far more children (29%) report spending significant amounts of time reading at home than at the start of the school year. They also show an improved attitude towards individual conferences with the teacher, with only one student (5%) reporting a negative response in that category. I was particularly pleased with their 100% positive rating of my reading aloud, too.

On the other hand, I was disappointed to see that they had become more negative in their attitudes toward self-selected reading and writing—both rated a 23% increase in negative responses. I believe, however, that some of this might be due to the attitude degeneration that is common among students towards the end of sixth grade. When spring comes, they begin anticipate moving on to junior high school and they often develop a bad attitude towards many aspects of elementary school.

Earlier in the semester I had done a cloze assessment of the readability of our social studies textbook as an assignment for my Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum class. The students did very well on this, so I decided to do a cloze activity as an additional assessment of their ability to read grade-level narrative text. I selected the beginning pages of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, by J.K. Rowling, for

three reasons: I thought it would be a high-interest selection for the students, it seemed to have little cultural bias, and it was listed in our school library as being written at a 6.8 grade level—right where the students should be. Following the directions from my graduate school textbook (Sejnost and Thiese, 2001, p. 11), I copied a 300-word passage from the book. When I ran a spell check, the computer assessed the reading level of the passage at 10.5 grade level, much higher than I had previously thought. Leaving the first sentence intact, I then deleted every fifth word up to a total of 50 missing words (Appendix L).

Once again, I was surprised by the results of this assessment, but this time in a much more positive way. On a cloze activity, a score of 40% correct responses or below indicates that the selection is written at the frustration level for the student, indicating that the material is too difficult for the child to read even with assistance. Only two students scored in this category. A score of 40% to 60% shows that the material is at the child's instructional level; the level I would expect from most of the class on a book of this sort. Students in this category should be able to read and comprehend the text with teacher support. Three students scored in this range. Scores of 60% or more mean that the book is written at the child's independent reading level. No teacher support or assistance should be required. *Fourteen* students scored in this range, some with as much as 92% correct. (Appendix M)

Table 10

Cloze Assessment 3/21/03

Percent of Correct responses:	40 % or <	40% - 60%	60% or >
	Frustration	Instructional	Independent
Number of Students	2	3	14
Percent of Students	10%	16%	74%

This data is much more in line with my experience and observations of my students. I have seen throughout the year that the students were intelligent, capable of handling grade-appropriate instruction, and working at an independent level. In no way did they match the profile of the group pictured in the initial data as seen in the state standards test or other assessments—all of which had made them seem like a needy, troubled bunch of low-achievers.

I had intended to administer the basic reading inventory to the students at the start and finish of the intervention, but changed my plan to the use of a running record based on a tape-recorded passage from the social studies text, instead. Once again, fate threw a curve ball. When I sat down to analyze the results of the students' initial reading sample, quite a few weeks into the project, the cassette tape was blank—nothing had recorded at all. Since I could not, of course, go back and re-create their original reading levels, I decided I would have to substitute the data I had gathered during our reading conferences. I almost decided to throw the tape recorder out the window, too, but I changed my mind.

Assessment of student reading abilities during conferences showed excellent improvement from September to March, again confirming my own observations of the children's growth and success. Using a short record-keeping sheet (Appendix B), as students read aloud during their individual conferences, I rated their fluency and comprehension and recorded their errors. The data from this evaluation shows that the percentage of students in the class reading with excellent fluency increased by 27%, and students demonstrating excellent comprehension increased by 15%. Meanwhile, the student error rate dropped to 0.79 by March—less than one error per student per

reading sample, from an average of 2 errors per student in September. These results appear in table eleven.

Table 11

Teacher's Anecdotal Record of Student Reading Samples

September 2002 to March 2003

	Excellent		Good		Fair		Poor	
	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar
Fluency	31%	58%	21%	26%	21%	16%	26%	0%
Comprehension	37%	42%	42%	42%	21%	11%	0%	5%

Number of Errors	0		1		2		3		4+	
	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar
	21%	42%	11%	42%	31%	11%	21%	5%	16%	0%

Almost as an afterthought, I asked the class for one more piece of data. We spent some time reflecting on their growth as readers over the year. How did they feel about their reading abilities? Did they think they were good at the process of reading—decoding, finding the meanings of unfamiliar words? How fluent did they think their reading was—did they stop and start, or did their reading seem to flow naturally? How did they think they did at comprehension—did they understand what they read, or was it hard to figure things out? And finally, did they feel that they could handle grade level material, or was it too hard or too easy for them? I put these questions on the overhead and allowed time to write. Since this was not a finalized piece of writing, students had quite a few technical errors, but some of their responses were well worth noting nonetheless.

Samir: "I like to read six grade level but some time is hard books. I feel good about what I read but some book are hard for me."

Diana: "I feel that sixth grade books are easy. All through Hatchet – Number the Stars. Those books were very easy. The social studies book is also easy. On a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 being easy and 10 being hard, I would say 1."

Mayra: "I feel good about my reading. The book Hatchet—I felt it was in my reading level. The novel Number the Stars was easy. I think that I'm doing o.k. with reading."

Josephina: "I think that I do process well while reading. I can make out what some words are. I can recognize some words and what they mean. I go back and read the sentence when I don't understand it. I also read on to try to find what the book means."

Johnny: "I think I do very well on the process. I don't have to look at the words and sound them out only a cuple times. I think I read easy because some books have easy words in them so I can understand them."

Doug: "When I read I get stopped on some words but not all. I am a fluent most of the time but not all was. I comprehend well. I feel comfortable reading 6th grade material. I like to read poems and sometimes non-fiction. I hate the star test."

It seemed to me that the students had, for the most part, become quite conscious of their own reading abilities through this process. I was especially pleased to see that those who had previously held a low opinion of themselves as readers had come to have a more positive view and to recognize that they were doing a good job.

Conclusions and Recommendations

What, then, is the cause of this wide discrepancy of data? In my search for answers, I started with the instructional assistant/technology facilitator who administers the Accelerated Reader and STAR programs in our school computer lab. She observed that the students' behavior during the test could have a large effect on their scores. She also reported observing questions on the test for which the student might have no background knowledge, and therefore answer incorrectly. For example, a boy taking the STAR test was given a paragraph about someone taking a lemon-oil bubble bath. What boy knows anything about bubble baths? Another student was presented with the question, "The train went into the dark _____." Among the answer choices were both "mountain" and "tunnel." The student answered "mountain," assuming that the tunnel went through the mountain. Even an adult might be confused by that kind of ambiguity. Students confirmed the statement that their behavior and state of mind at the time of testing could affect their scores. They also complained about the seemingly random nature of the test questions—the way they would sometimes be very easy and sometimes very hard.

Because my bilingual students showed the greatest gap between classroom performance and test scores, I asked several teachers of bilingual children their opinions of this phenomenon. They agreed with the children's own assessment, that bilingual students are still in the process of acquiring English vocabulary, even if they have been speaking English fluently for several years. These gaps in their personal reading word bank create problems in testing situations. Besides this, the tests are also written with inadvertent cultural bias—questions on them assume background

knowledge that children from another culture would simply not have. A good exam
of this is the sixth grade Terra Nova reading test. All of the reading passages follo
themes centering on the American Old West, a topic with which students from othe
cultures would not be familiar, but American children would know very well. This k
thing makes tests unnecessarily difficult for second-language learners.

Test anxiety is another source of low scores for some students. When pres
with a test, two of my students visibly shifted into panic mode. One of these childr
plowed through tests, obsessing over every question and running out of time at the
or, if there was no time limit, taking twice as long as everyone else to finish. Anoth
student curled up on her chair, bowed her head, and showed every sign of despair
during tests. When I gave the class the papers for the cloze assessment, she crun
up immediately. I gently took her paper away and asked her to read the exact sam
passage from the book orally once the group was done with the activity. She read
fluently, with excellent expression, and made only one error. Her answers to
comprehension questions were appropriate, with only one significant mistake. She
fact, did better in that conference than she had all year. Still another student react
with anger to testing situations, usually rushing through haphazardly, not caring ab
her scores. On the cloze, I showed her how to mask off all but one paragraph at a
which enabled her to concentrate on the task at hand without getting worked up ab
having to answer, "Fifty stupid questions." She ended up with one of the highest s
in the class.

Student-teacher reading conferences were definitely an effective means of
improving student reading achievement. The children gained in fluency and

comprehension and made fewer errors in their oral reading. Together, we were able to connect most of the students to books they enjoyed and could read successfully. The conferences also allowed me to gain insight about the students as individuals and to strengthen my relationships with them through this one-on-one interaction. In every classroom there are students who manage to become invisible. Individual conferences minimize this phenomenon.

I was able to make several important observations about sixth grade reading habits through this part of Four Blocks. For one thing, students of this age generally will read one book over a period of several days or weeks—most of the time they do not need a basket full of other reading material in front of them during silent reading. For another, intermediate students benefit most by having a way of finding books geared toward their tastes and interests. A catalog or other resource for connecting students with books would be an excellent tool to have at the teacher's disposal during conferences. I often found myself recommending books that I had read or that I liked—I need to find a way to broaden my ability to advise children on making literature choices—a book list of some kind would really help.

I often reflected on the issue of vocabulary acquisition, especially as it became clear how much higher some students' abilities were than their test scores. Why do I know the words (and even trivia) that I do? It is certainly not because I studied the topic in isolation or did hundreds of worksheets on vocabulary enrichment as a child. It is because I am a reader and have been so since I was nine years old. My students with gaps in their vocabulary will grow if they continue to read for pleasure every day. Again, connecting kids with books that they enjoy is the key.

I also wondered about the correlation between the amount students read and their reading level. It's a classic conundrum: are good readers good because they read a lot, or do people who read a lot become good readers? I love to read. I am very good at it. I do it often. On the other hand, I hate to play basketball. I stink at it. I never play it. If I were a bad reader, would I enjoy reading? Would I do it very often? Using the basketball analogy, if I were *required* to play basketball every day, would my skill level improve, and would that lead me to enjoy playing the game in the future? Probably not. But if I were somehow *persuaded* to join in and *choose* to play basketball on a daily basis, if I were given one-on-one support and encouragement, would I improve my game and perhaps even learn to enjoy it? I'd say the chances would be greater that way. Will it really help students to become better readers if they are more or less forced to read, even if they do not ever learn to enjoy it? Or is it better to somehow persuade them, to hook them into loving reading for themselves (once again) by connecting them with books they enjoy reading?

Natalie Babbitt, in her essay *A Writer's Path to Literacy* (1992), writes:

> There are people who are fond of saying that in the good old days before t.v. all children were readers. This is...rewriting of history. Not all my friends were readers. Economic levels seem to have had nothing to do with it; not intelligence levels, either. Some read, some didn't, and that was the beginning and end of it. (p. 255)

She also wrote of "falling in love with language" through her own personal reading experiences as a child and of "the music of words." In her words, "Being literate means listening and learning to love the language." That echoes true for me, as well.

Though *The Black Stallion* first hooked me into reading when I was in third grade, I now enjoy a wider variety of literature than just horse stories—I fell in love with reading for its own sake. My brother Mark also loves to read. He was often late to classes in college because he had stayed up until the wee hours of the morning with a great book. In fact, Mark was the person who introduced me to *Ender's Game*. My other brother, Brent, is a very different kind of reader. To the best of my knowledge, he has never read anything that was not about a car. Even as a toddler, the only story he would listen to our mother read aloud was *The Truck and Bus Book*. Today, he reads *Hot Rod* and *National Dragster* magazines. He may not be a scholar, but when I need my car repaired or my leaky sink fixed, he is the first person I call. Certainly he is just as competent a reader as either of his siblings—but the way in which he uses this skill is vastly different: Brent prefers efferent reading; Mark and I are primarily aesthetic readers.

The literacy experiences of my brothers and myself illustrate an important fact: teachers must always remember that students come in a myriad of varieties, and we should tailor our expectations to meet their individual needs. It is foolish, and even egocentric, to assume that our students will automatically make a personal connection to the literature that teachers or textbook companies decide they should read. The nature of the child will dictate, to a large extent, the way in which he or she will learn to appreciate literature. That's the power of self-selected reading in a balanced literacy program: a child who loves automotives, a child who lives for fantasy and sci-fi, and a child who longs for a horse of her own can all find inspiring books—they are not limited

to the cookie-cutter approach of traditional reading instruction. This is especially potent with the help of a teacher who is sensitive to the students' needs.

Reading conferences have afforded me the setting in which to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, interests and dislikes, and to use these to help them become better readers. If it were not for the conferences, I doubt that I would have ever learned how much more competent the majority of my students were than their standardized test scores portrayed them to be. I would never have seen the specific errors that Jesenia was making, the way Doug could comprehend extremely high level vocabulary once he sounded it out, or the sparkle in Natalie's eyes as she and I talked about books we both loved to read. Without a doubt, reading conferences were successful.

In the future, there are several changes I would make to improve the SSR block, especially in terms of student-teacher conferences. First, I will not try to use book bins again: I will find a way to display my classroom supply of reading materials in an enticing way, but I will not limit students to using only what they can find in the room. I will also begin to expand my classroom book collection to include more of the genres of literature that are lacking.

Second, I intend to seek out or create a book list for use during conferences so that I can recommend books to students beyond what I know from my own personal experience.

Third, I will set up my daily schedule for next year in such a way that SSR is not at a time of day as prone to disruption as it was this year. Hopefully, that will increase the likelihood of conferences happening with more frequency and regularity.

Fourth, I do not intend to use the STAR test any more. I am going to consult with my principal and our library-media teacher to find a more accurate tool to use in assessing students' reading abilities. I am also going to strongly advocate incorporating alternative assessments into our school improvement plan. Standardized test scores may be the way the rest of the world judges schools, but we should also have more comprehensive ways of proving our students are competent learners even if they do not test well.

In many ways I have not mastered the instructional methods of the Four Blocks of Literacy just yet. When I focus on one block, the others suffer from lack of attention. The more SSR the class does, the less time there is for Guided Reading. The more mini-lessons I teach in Writing, the less time the students have to spend in actual writing. This is still a learning process for me.

Nevertheless, I believe that balanced literacy is the most promising way I have ever seen for teaching literacy. I am old enough to have personally experienced many changes in reading instruction, beginning with learning to read from the Ginn textbook series in the 1970's. When I became a teacher in the 1980's, the district used Houghton-Mifflin basal readers. These were eliminated in a switch to whole language during the early 1990's, when each grade level was given novels to use in a district-created program called *Journey Through Literature*. Another shift in the late 1990's re-introduced a basal, this time a literature anthology-style version, which was added to our core novels. Compared to all these variations, the balanced literacy model of instruction is by far the best I have experienced. I am hopeful that we will continue in

this philosophy at our school and in our district without jumping on the next instructional bandwagon before we have a firm hold on this one.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Student Language Arts Survey

Date: _____

Name: _____

This is a survey to help me to understand how your previous experiences in school have shaped the way you learn and how you use language arts outside of school. It is not going to be graded and will not affect the way I feel about you at all. It's just a way for me to get to know how to teach you the best way I can. Please answer all the questions *honestly*.

Part 1:

How do you feel about the following language arts activities based on your experience in school last year? Please circle the number that best expresses your feelings.

1. Self Selected Reading — hate it------don't like it------don't care------like it------love it
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Literature Circles — hate it------don't like it------don't care------like it------love it
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Teacher reading aloud — hate it------don't like it------don't care------like it------love it
   1 2 3 4 5

4. Reading with a partner or a small group — hate it------don't like it------don't care------like it------love it
   1 2 3 4 5

5. Discussing books as a class — hate it------don't like it------don't care------like it------love it
   1 2 3 4 5

6. Writing what you choose to write	hate it------	don't like it------	don't care------	like it------	love it
	1	2	3	4	5
7. Writing what you are assigned to write	hate it------	don't like it------	don't care------	like it------	love it
	1	2	3	4	5
8. Conferences with the teacher	hate it------	don't like it------	don't care------	like it------	love it
	1	2	3	4	5

Part 2

How much time do you spend doing each of these language-related activities every day? Please circle the response that is closest to the actual amount of time you do this activity on an average day.

1. Reading books just for fun:
   15 min. or less----15 to 30 min.------30 min. to 1 hour------more than 1 hour

2. Reading other things like cereal boxes, magazine ads, newspapers, web sites…:
   15 min. or less----15 to 30 min.------30 min. to 1 hour------more than 1 hour

3. Writing on paper, such as letters, journals, diaries and so on:
   15 min. or less----15 to 30 min.------30 min. to 1 hour------more than 1 hour

4. Reading and/or writing e-mail:
   15 min. or less----15 to 30 min.------30 min. to 1 hour------more than 1 hour

Thank you very much for your help!

Appendix B

Self-Selected Reading Conference Record

Student _____ Date _____

Text Title _____ Page number _____

Student Reading Fluency (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

Student Comprehension (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

Strategies:

Attempts to sound out unknown word
Uses context clues
Uses syntax clues
Self-corrects
Asks for assistance

This book was (circle one)

Too easy Appropriate Too hard

Comments:

Self-Selected Reading Conference Record

Student _____ Date _____

Text Title _____ Page number _____

Student Reading Fluency (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

Student Comprehension (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

Strategies:

Attempts to sound out unknown word
Uses context clues
Uses syntax clues
Self-corrects
Asks for assistance

This book was (circle one)

Too easy Appropriate Too hard

Comments

Appendix C

"Best Practice"—New or Not?

Bronson Alcott, a personal friend and contemporary of Emerson and Thoreau, was a philosopher and educator in New England during the early 1800's. He promoted racially mixed schools, taught the alphabet to children using large-motor skills, and believed lessons should be fun for children. Most of his ideas were far ahead of his time. Many of them are part of schools today, albeit under different guises and terminology. In Little Men, authored by his daughter Louisa May Alcott, many of the instructional methods used at the fictitious school of Plumfield bear a striking resemblance to "new" ideas in education today.

Balanced Literacy:

Working With Words

"Day after day he (Billy) pored over the alphabet, proudly said A and B, and thought he knew them. ...Mr. Bhaer had infinite patience with him and kept on...:" (p. 25)

"...recite their grammar, history, and geography..." (p. 51)

Guided Reading
--Peer grouping

"I think I could read this," said Nat, who had been examining the books.

"Read a bit then; I'll help you," resumed Tommy with a patronizing air. So Nat did his best and floundered through a page with many friendly 'boosts' from Tommy, who told him he would soon 'go it' as well as anybody." (p. 38)

--Individualized instruction

"When Nat went into school on Monday morning...Mr. Bhaer gave him a seat in the deep window, where he could turn his back on the others, and Franz heard him say his lessons there, so no one could hear his blunders or see how he blotted his copy book." (p. 51)

Self-Selected Reading
--Peer Sharing

"Demi was never tired of reading and explaining his favorite books, and many a pleasant hour did they spend in the old willow, reveling over 'Robinson Crusoe,' "Arabian Nights,' ...and the other dear, immortal stories that will delight children for centuries to come. This opened a new world to Nat, and his eagerness to see what came next in the story helped him on until he could read as well as anybody, and felt so rich and proud with his new accomplishment, that there was danger of his being as much of a bookworm as Demi." (p. 54)

--Teacher suggestion

"'Now here is a pleasant story about a boy who hurt his foot worse than you did yours; read it, and see how bravely he bore his trouble,' said Mrs. Bhaer.

"She put that charming little book, 'The Crofton Boys,' into his hands and left him for an hour, passing in and out from time to time that he might not feel lonely. Dan did not love to read, but soon got so interested that he was surprised when the boys came home." (p. 168)

Integrating Reading and Writing into the Curriculum:

"...so suppose you read up about [the things you bring to put in the school's new natural history museum] so that when anybody asks questions you can answer them and understand the matter. ...Once a week the rest of you take turns to read a composition, or tell about some animal, mineral, or vegetable. We should all like that, and I think it would put considerable useful knowledge into our heads."

"We should have a library for the special purpose..." (p. 183)

Other instances of modern educational practices found in the story include the construction of a working, child-sized kitchen (authentic, hands-on learning), a boy being encouraged to follow his interest in the world around him (naturalist intelligence), and accounts of plays, music, and many other school activities that incorporate multiple intelligences. Examples of these include:

Classroom Management:

"...their rules were few and sensible..." (p. 8)

"...in Professor Bhaer's opinion, self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control were more important and he tried to teach them carefully." (p. 28)

Cooperative Learning:

"...'half the science of teaching is knowing how much children do for one another, and when to mix them'..."

Kinesthetic Learning Modalities:

"...'we dance sometimes and do gymnastics to music.'": (p. 9)

Peer Mentoring:

"Mrs. Bhaer had put Nat next to Tommy, because that roly-poly boy had a frank and social way with him, very attractive to shy persons." (p. 10)

Although Mr. Alcott's views were never fully realized during his lifetime, it should be noted that these instructional methods existed long before the buzz-words which are so much a part of today's "best practice."

Appendix D

STAR Test Results

9/27/02

Summary Report

STAR Reading Friday, 09/27/02, 03:23 PM
Date Range: 8/27/02 to 6/6/03

Score Summary							
19 Students							
Mean Scores	6.08	562	5.3	29	38.1	4.8	3.9-5.4

Percentile Rank Distribution Summary

Percentile	Students	Percent
Below 25th	10	52.6
25th to 49th	4	21.1
50th to 74th	3	15.8
75th & Above	2	10.5

IRL Distribution Summary

IRL	Students	Percent
PP	0	0.0
P - 0.9	0	0.0
1.0 - 1.9	1	5.3
2.0 - 2.9	3	15.8
3.0 - 3.9	4	21.1
4.0 - 4.9	4	21.1
5.0 - 5.9	5	26.3
6.0 - 6.9	0	0.0
7.0 - 7.9	0	0.0
8.0 - 8.9	0	0.0
9.0 - 9.9	1	5.3
10.0 - 10.9	0	0.0
11.0 - 11.9	1	5.3
12.0 - 12.9	0	0.0
PHS	0	0.0

GE Distribution Summary

GE	Students	Percent
0.0 - 0.9	0	0.0
1.0 - 1.9	0	0.0
2.0 - 2.9	5	26.3
3.0 - 3.9	1	5.3
4.0 - 4.9	4	21.1
5.0 - 5.9	3	15.8
6.0 - 6.9	4	21.1
7.0 - 7.9	0	0.0
8.0 - 8.9	0	0.0
9.0 - 9.9	0	0.0
10.0 - 10.9	1	5.3
11.0 - 11.9	0	0.0
12.0 - 12.9+	1	5.3

Snapshot Report

STAR Reading Friday, 09/27/02, 02:53 PM
Date Range: All

Score Summary						
19 Students						
Mean Scores	6.08	4.8	562	5.3	29	NA

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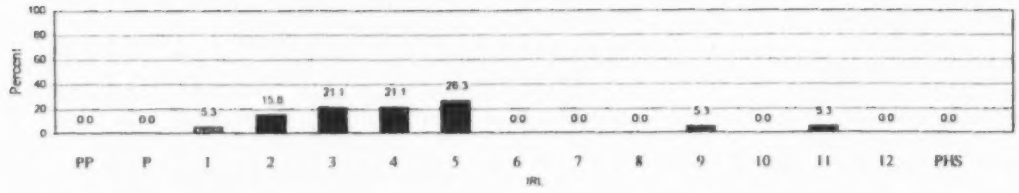
Snapshot Report

STAR Reading : Friday, 09/27/02, 02:53 PM
Date Range : All

IRL Distribution Summary

IRL	Students	Percent
PP	0	0.0
P	0	0.0
1	1	5.3
2	3	15.8
3	4	21.1
4	4	21.1
5	5	26.3
6	0	0.0
7	0	0.0
8	0	0.0
9	1	5.3
10	0	0.0
11	1	5.3
12	0	0.0
PHS	0	0.0

IRL Distribution



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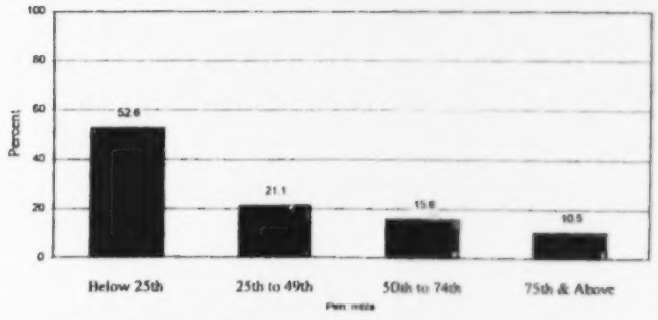
Snapshot Report

STAR Reading - Friday, 09/27/02, 02:53 PM
Date Range: All

Class : Rm 126

Percentile Rank Distribution Summary		
Percentile	**Students**	**Percent**
Below 25th	10	52.6
25th to 49th	4	21.1
50th to 74th	3	15.8
75th & Above	2	10.5

Percentile Rank Distribution



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Appendix E

Language Arts Survey Results

September 2002

(Survey was administered to 19 children)

Part I	hate it	don't like it	don't care	like it	love it
1.	1	0	7	7	4
2.	4	4	5	1	3
3.	0	0	3	6	10
4.	1	2	7	5	4
5.	2	4	9	3	1
6.	1	0	7	4	7
7.	3	3	8	2	3
8.	2	4	7	4	2

Part 2	15 min. >	15 –30 min.	30 – 60 min.	60 min. +
1.	9	5	2	2
2.	11	5	2	1
3.	11	4	1	1
4.	6	3	3	3

Appendix F

Annotated Bibliography—Novels Used in Project

Card, O. S. (1977). *Ender's game*. New York: Tor.

This futuristic novel tells the story of a time when Earth has twice been attacked by a fearsome alien enemy. A young boy who calls himself Ender is recruited by the International Fleet to come to a battle school in space, where he trains to be the commander who might save humanity from the next invasion. But, is everything as it really seems? And will Ender survive battle school?

Card, O.S. (1999). *Ender's shadow*. New York: Tor.

Card re-visits the same storyline as in his novel Ender's Game, but tells it from the point of view of Bean—Ender's closest friend and competitor in the battle school.

Haddix, M.P. (1998). *Among the hidden*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Luke is a "shadow child" forced to live in hiding because his very existence is illegal—only two children are allowed per family and Luke had the misfortune to be born third. He has never met anyone outside his immediate family; he is not allowed to leave the house or even look out the windows lest he be seen by the Population Police. One day, as Luke spies through the attic vent, he sees a face in the window of a neighboring house where no child should be. Luke's life improves as they secretly become friends, but the outcome is ultimately tragic.

Lowry, L. (1989). *Number the stars*. New York: Dell Publishing.

Set in WWII Denmark, this is the story of Annemarie Johansen and her family, who help their Jewish neighbors, the Rosens, escape from the German soldiers and find safety in Sweden.

Paulsen, G. (1987). *Hatchet*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Brian Robeson survives the crash of a Cessna in the Canadian wilderness after the plane's pilot suffers a fatal heart attack. The only supplies he has are the clothes on his back and the hatchet at his belt. When Brian realizes he is not going to be rescued, he must use his memory, intelligence, and the hatchet to make a new life in the woods.

Paulsen, G. (1996) *Brian's winter*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

In response to thousands of reader letters regarding the ending of Hatchet (in which Brian is ultimately rescued) Paulsen wrote this alternate sequel following Brian's experiences as he remains in the wilderness and must learn to survive during the winter.

Appendix G

STAR Test Results

3/20/03

Snapshot Report

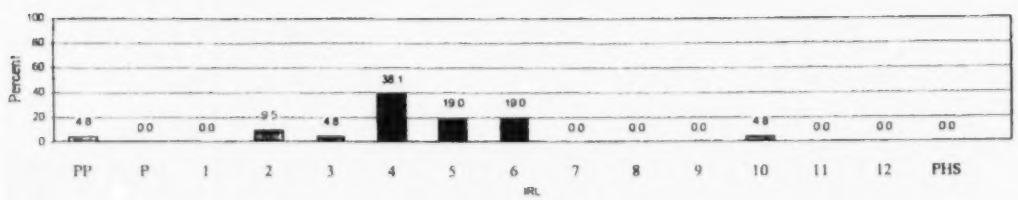
STAR Reading . Thursday, 03/20/03, 12:58 PM
Date Range: 8/27/02 to 6/6/03

Teacher : Mackh, Sarah

IRL Distribution Summary

IRL	Students	Percent
PP	1	4.8
P	0	0.0
1	0	0.0
2	2	9.5
3	1	4.8
4	8	38.1
5	4	19.0
6	4	19.0
7	0	0.0
8	0	0.0
9	0	0.0
10	1	4.8
11	0	0.0
12	0	0.0
PHS	0	0.0

IRL Distribution



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Snapshot Report

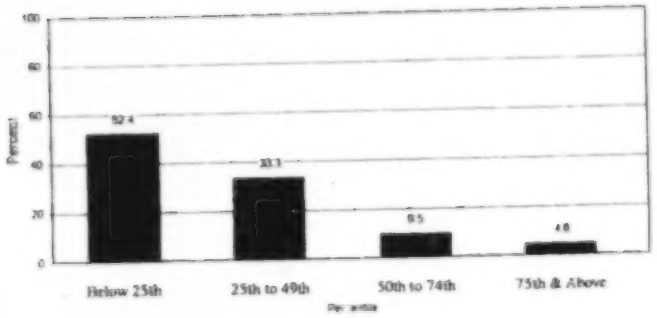
STAR Reading Thursday, 03/20/03, 12:58 PM
Date Range: 8/27/02 to 6/6/03

Teacher : Mackh, Sarah

Percentile Rank Distribution Summary

Percentile	Students	Percent
Below 25th	11	52.4
25th to 49th	7	33.3
50th to 74th	2	9.5
75th & Above	1	4.8

Percentile Rank Distribution



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Snapshot Report

STAR Reading Thursday, 03/20/03, 12:58 PM
Date Range: 8/27/02 to 6/6/03

Score Summary 21 Students						
Mean Scores	6.66	4.7	572	5.4	23	NA

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Growth Report

STAR Reading · Thursday, 03/20/03, 12:22 PM

Pretest Dates : 8/27/02 to 6/8/03

Growth Summary

20 Students	Grade Placement	SS	GE	PR	NCE	IRL
Pretest Mean	6.11	585	5.2	27	37.3	4.7
Posttest Mean	6.66	597	5.6	25	36.1	4.9
Change	0.55	42	0.4	-2	-1.2	0.2

Summary Report

STAR Reading · Thursday, 03/20/03, 12:49 PM
Date Range: 8/27/02 to 6/6/03

Percentile Rank Distribution Summary

Percentile	Students	Percent
Below 25th	11	52.4
25th to 49th	7	33.3
50th to 74th	2	9.5
75th & Above	1	4.8

IRL Distribution Summary

IRL	Students	Percent
PP	1	4.8
P - 0.9	0	0.0
1.0 - 1.9	0	0.0
2.0 - 2.9	2	9.5
3.0 - 3.9	1	4.8
4.0 - 4.9	8	38.1
5.0 - 5.9	4	19.0
6.0 - 6.9	4	19.0
7.0 - 7.9	0	0.0
8.0 - 8.9	0	0.0
9.0 - 9.9	0	0.0
10.0 - 10.9	1	4.8
11.0 - 11.9	0	0.0
12.0 - 12.9	0	0.0
PHS	0	0.0

GE Distribution Summary

GE	Students	Percent
0.0 - 0.9	1	4.8
1.0 - 1.9	0	0.0
2.0 - 2.9	2	9.5
3.0 - 3.9	0	0.0
4.0 - 4.9	7	33.3
5.0 - 5.9	3	14.3
6.0 - 6.9	5	23.8
7.0 - 7.9	1	4.8
8.0 - 8.9	1	4.8
9.0 - 9.9	0	0.0
10.0 - 10.9	1	4.8
11.0 - 11.9	0	0.0
12.0 - 12.9+	0	0.0

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Appendix H

Language Arts Survey Results

March 2003

(Survey was administered to 18 children)

Part I	hate it	don't like it	don't care	like it	love it
1.	1	4	5	3	5
2.	3	5	6	0	1
3.	0	0	0	10	8
4.	1	2	4	5	6
5.	2	1	8	5	2
6.	3	2	7	5	1
7.	3	2	8	2	3
8.	1	0	8	3	6

Part 2	15 min. >	15 –30 min.	30 – 60 min.	60 min. +
1.	3	6	2	7
2.	10	4	2	2
3.	11	4	2	2
4.	10	2	2	4

Appendix I

Saint Xavier University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
IMPROVING STUDENT LITERACY

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am currently enrolled in a masters degree program at Saint Xavier University. This progran requires me to design and implement a project on an issue that directly affects my classroom instruction. I have chosen to examine the area or improving students' literacy skills.

The purpose of this project is to use a balanced model of classroom instruction in the teachin reading and writing to help students improve in these skill areas. It will help your child to become a better reader and writer.

I will be conducting my project from September through January. The activities related to th project will be part of my regular classroom instruction. The gathering of information for my project during these activities offers no risk of any kind to your child.

Your permission allows me to include your student in the reporting of information for my project. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and any information inclu in the project report will be grouped so that no individual can be identified. The report will b used to share what I have learned as a result of this project with other professionals in the fiel education.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the stu at any time. If you choose not to participate, information gathered about your student will no included in the report.

If you have any questions or would like further information about my project, please contact here at school.

If you agree to have your child participate in the project, please sign the attached statement ar return it to me. I will be happy to provide you with a copy of the statement if you wish.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Sarah J. Mackh

PLEASE RETURN THE ATTACHED STATEMENT TO ME BY : _____

Saint Xavier University
Parent or Guardian Consent to Participate in a Research Study
IMPROVING STUDENT LITERACY

I, _____ , the parent or guardian of a student in Mrs. Mackh's sixth grade class, understand the purpose of her research project to improve student literacy. She has explained that there are no risks of any kind involved and has offered to answer any questions I might have about my child's participation in this project.

I voluntarily give my permission for my child to participate in this project. I understand that all the results of this research will be kept confidential. I also understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my own information.

_____ _____
Signature of Parent or Guardian Date

Appendix J

Saint Xavier University
Permiso para participar en un estudio de investigación
El desarrollo de lectura y escritura en los estudiantes

Estimados padres o guardianes:

Estoy estudiando en un programa de educación en la universidad de Saint Xavier. Este programa me requiere implementar un proyecto de estudio acerca de un tema que afecta a la instrucción en mi salón. He escogido examinar las destrezas de lectura y escritura de los estudiantes.

El propósito del proyecto es usar el modelo de instrucción balanceada en la enseñaza de lectura y escritura para ayudar a los estudiantes en estas áreas de aprendizaje.

Mi proyecto tomara sitio durante los meses de septiembre a enero. Las actividades serán una parte de la instrucción regular de mi salón. La información que tiene relación a mi proyecto durante estas actividades no hará daño a su hija/o de ninguna manera.

Su permiso me permitirá incluir a su hijo/a en el reporte de la información del proyecto. Toda la información adquirida será completamente confidencial, y también toda la información en el reporte será puesta en grupos de manera que ninguna persona pueda ser identificada. El reporte será usado para compartir lo que aprendí como un resulto del proyecto con otros profesionales de la educación.

La participación en el estudio es completamente voluntaria. Usted puede retirar su permiso en cualquier momento. Si no quiere participar, la información acerca de su hijo/a no estará incluida en el reporte.

Si tiene cualquier pregunta o necesita mas información, favor de llamarme a la escuela Anne Fox. (630) 837-2430

Si me da permiso para que su hijo/a participe en el estudio, favor de firmar la forma adjunta a esta carta. Si prefiere, puedo mandar una copia de la forma a casa para ustedes.

Sinceramente,

Mrs. Sarah Mackh

Favor de devolver la forma antes del día:_____

Doy permiso para que mi hijo/a_____
participe en un proyecto de estudio de información del desarrollo de la lectura y la escritura. Se me ha explicado que las actividades no van a hacer daño de ninguna manera y que mis preguntas serán contestadas.

Doy el permiso voluntariamente para que mi hijo/a participe en este proyecto. Entiendo que los resultados del estudio serán confidenciales. Entiendo también que puedo guardar una copia de esta forma de permiso.

_____

Firma de padres

_____

Fecha

Appendix K

Saint Xavier University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
IMPROVING STUDENT LITERACY

Dear Student,

I am participating in a masters degree program at Saint Xavier University. Part of this program requires me to carry out a research project that will improve the way I teach. I want to study ways to improve students' reading and writing skills.

This project will teach me better ways to teach you how to read and write. It will help you because you will improve in your reading and writing skills.

I will be doing my project from September through January of this school year. All the activities for the project will be done in our regular schoolwork during the normal school day. There are no risks involved for you at any time. You will participate in the same activities and have the same amount of schoolwork whether you are in the study or not.

By signing the permission form on the next page, I can use the results I collect about you in my project report. All information I gather about you will be grouped so that nobody can be identified as an individual. All information will be kept confidential.

You are not obligated to be in the study. Participation is completely voluntary. You may decide to withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study, I will not include information about you in my report.

If you agree to participate in this research project, please read and sign the next page and return it to me. I will be glad to give you your own copy if you wish.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Sarah J. Mackh

PLEASE RETURN THE PERMISSION FORM BY: _____

Saint Xavier University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
IMPROVING STUDENT LITERACY

I, _____ , a student in Mrs. Mackh's sixth grade class, understand the purpose of her research project to improve student literacy. She has explained that there are no risks of any kind involved and has offered to answer any questions I might have about my participation in this project.

I voluntarily give my permission to participate in this project. I understand that all the results of this research will be kept confidential. I also understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my own information.

_____ _____
Signature of Student Date

Appendix L

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
by J. K. Rowling

Chapter 1 Owl Post

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated (1)_____ summer holidays more than (2)_____ other time of year. (3)_____ another, he really wanted (4)_____ do his homework, but (5)_____ forced to do it in (6)_____, in the dead of (7)_____ . And he happened to (8)_____ a wizard.

It was (9)_____ midnight, and he was (10)_____ on his stomach in (11)_____ , the blankets drawn right (12)_____ his head like a (13)_____, a flashlight in one (14)_____ and a large leather-bound (15)_____ (*A History of Magic* (16)_____ Bathilda Bagshot) propped open (17)_____ the pillow. Harry moved (18)_____ tip of his eagle-(19)_____ quill down the page, (20)_____ as he looked for (21)_____ that would help him (22)_____ his essay, "Witch Burning (23)_____ the Fourteenth Century Was (24)_____ Pointless—discuss."

The quill (25)_____ at the top of (26)_____ likely-looking paragraph. Harry (27)_____ his round glasses up

(28)_____ bridge of his nose, (29)_____ his flashlight closer to (30)_____ book, and read:

"Non-magic *(31)*_____ (more commonly known as Muggles) *(32)*_____ particularly afraid or magic *(33)*_____ medieval times, but not *(34)*_____ good at recognizing it. *(35)*_____ the rare occasion that *(36)*_____ did catch a real *(37)*_____ or wizard, burning had *(38)*_____ effect whatsoever. The witch *(39)*_____ wizard would perform a *(40)*_____ Flame Freezing Charm and *(41)*_____ pretend to shriek with *(42)*_____ while enjoying a gentle, *(43)*_____ sensation. Indeed, Wendelyn the *(44)*_____ enjoyed being burned so *(45)*_____ that she allowed herself *(46)*_____ be caught no less *(47)*_____ forty-seven times in *(48)*_____ disguises.

Harry put his quill (49)_____ his teeth and reached (50)_____ his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully, he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he'd probably find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

Appendix M

Cloze Results

3/20/03

X = one student's results

Student Scores (Percent correct)

0 – 40% = Frustration Level = 1 Student

24	X	
48		
50		
52		
54		
56		
58	X	X
60	X	

40% - 60% = Instructional Level = 3 Students

62		
64	X	
66		
68		
70		
72	X	
74	X	X
76	X	
78	X	
80		
82	X	
84	X	
86		
88	X	X
90	X	
92	X	X
94	X	
96		
98		
100		

60% - 100% = Independent Level = 14 students

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